

MRS
BROWNING
&
ROBERT
BROWNING
& THEIR
POETRY

POETRY & LIFE

E. B. BROWNING & HER POETRY

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING & HER POETRY

BY

KATHLEEN E. ROYDS

Author of "Coleridge and His Poetry"



LONDON : GEORGE G.
HARRAP & COMPANY
9 PORTSMOUTH STREET
KINGSWAY W.C. ♣ MCMXII

ELIZABETH BARRETT
&
HER POETRY

KATHLEEN J. HODGKINS
Editor of the Introduction and Notes



PRINTED BY
BALLANTYNE & COMPANY LTD
AT THE BALLANTYNE PRESS
TAVISTOCK STREET COVENT GARDEN
LONDON

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E. B. BROWNING & HER POETRY

WHILE it is impossible to affix a distinctive label to the literature of an era so complex and many-sided as the nineteenth century, certain influences may be traced which were at work in all its most vital and important productions. Among these the advance of democracy takes a prominent place. The principle on which the democratic theory is based, that every unit counts for one, rendered it inevitable that the "woman's movement" should take its rise with and be involved in its progress. Women, as a body, awoke to self-realisation in the nineteenth century; and with this they became articulate as a distinct force in the literature of the age.

Individuals had, of course, found expression before in various directions, particularly in the novel; while, in Scotland especially, lyrics as immortal as those of Burns had come from the pen of a woman—Lady Nairne. But in general what they wrote was conventional, and was stunted for want of wide experience and culture. When the fetters which bound down the eighteenth century to materialism, intellectualism, and prose were finally shattered at the French Revolution, and the air was cleared of the dust raised by the explosion, a fresh horizon was open to view. The new age was intensely

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interested in itself ; more awake to its own ignorance and infinite possibilities ; increasingly alive to the wonder and mystery of being. It could find place for any contribution of thought or feeling which might enlarge its boundaries or illuminate its depths. And here woman discovered her field. She was quickened into spontaneity by the conviction that what she had to say was worthy of a hearing, and had its part to play in the struggle of the age toward completer self-knowledge and larger prospects.

The woman poet came to self-consciousness in a world that was already old. Without any attempt to generalize along lines of sex, we may trace back to this fact many of the features which have been frequently pointed out as distinguishing her work from that of her brother poets. The pressure of " the burden of the mystery " was hers by inheritance in her youth ; and with the golden thread of youthful freshness the silver strand of sadness is constantly interwoven. Self-analysis and introspection were a sign of the age. The woman poet puts a great deal of herself directly into her writing, and she takes the world, herself, and her mission eminently seriously. This is not merely equivalent to saying that she is lyrical without a sense of humour. It means that what she says is fired by a genuineness and an enthusiasm which give it vitality and weight : though form may occasionally be sacrificed to the impatience which urges her to seek expression. Mrs. Browning is clearly a case in point ; though the artistic restraint and

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sense of form in which she was lacking were possessed to the full by Christina Rossetti.

It does, however, follow that the woman poet is generally lyrical. Subjectivity stamps her work. She writes at the call of feeling and her great appeal is to the emotions. She is usually, in consequence, artless and direct in utterance; while her importance lies in her self-revelation, and in the truth with which she is able to touch the chords of nobility, tenderness, and pathos in the human heart.

It is well to keep in mind these few facts concerning the conditions under which women poets began to write, and the place that was theirs to fill, in turning to consider one of the first, as well as the foremost, of those whose work counts in the literature of the century. Just what Mrs. Browning's position was we shall be better able to judge in the light of her life-story, and the point shall be taken up again when that is told.

II

IT serves small purpose to examine the family records of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, for any light they throw on her genius. Of her immediate relations, her mother seems to have played little part in the moulding of her talents. She owed more to her father's influence.

Edward Moulton Barrett belonged on his mother's side to a family of wealthy West Indian landowners, and was himself a rich man.

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That Elizabeth Barrett grew up in a sheltered, even luxurious home, had important bearings later. Her attitude toward the problems which afterwards engaged her attention was always that of a theorist, and did not spring from any direct experience of social evils. But perhaps it is not fanciful to trace this interest to her father's influence in early years ; for stories tell of meetings in the neighbourhood of his home, at which he used to speak, while the little Elizabeth, companion of his drives, sat and waited and listened. It may be, too, that she gained from him her serious outlook on life, and a tendency to moralize, often to over-moralize ; for he seems to have been strict to narrowness in his views. From the first he took a deep interest in her studies and encouraged her writing. He had printed her juvenile epic poem, "The Battle of Marathon," and to him, once "my public and my critic," she dedicated in gratitude a later volume.

Elizabeth Barrett was born on March 6, 1806, at Coxhoe Hall, in the county of Durham. Three years later her father settled in a house he had had built for himself, with quaint gables and Gothic windows, "standing in a lovely park, among trees and sloping hills," at Hope End, near Ledbury, in Herefordshire. Here, amid quiet English scenery, in the seclusion of country life at the beginning of last century, Elizabeth spent her childhood and grew to womanhood.

The best, almost the only, record of these

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early years must be sought in her own poems. Several of the more important shorter ones are retrospective ; and "Aurora Leigh" is an invaluable spiritual autobiography. The picture is that of a child, studious, imaginative, and original. Her story is mainly concerned with thought and feeling ; little with events. She was by nature solitary, though the eldest of a large family. The landmarks that stand out as she looks back on her childhood are adventures experienced in lonely rambles ; or the opening up of a new kingdom, such as Keats found, through the reading of Homer and the poets. From her little green chamber, at whose window, surrounded by honeysuckle, she used to sit

And watch the morning quicken in the grey,
And hear the silence open like a flower
Leaf after leaf,

she sometimes escaped early on a summer morning

To slip downstairs through all the sleepy house,
As mute as any dream there, and escape
As a soul from the body, out of doors,
Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane,
And wander on the hills an hour or two,
Then back again before the house should stir.

Thoughtful and visionary, what to most children would be a quickly forgotten incident became for her food for meditation ; till it acquired symbolic meaning, and often a suggestion of mingled mystery and pathos, as she

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looked back at it in the light of after-experience. The scene of "The Lost Bower," written years after the adventure it records, was a wood near Hope End. It is imbued with charm through its delicate combination of reminiscence and mysticism.

THE LOST BOWER

I

In the pleasant orchard closes,
"God bless all our gains," say we ;
But "May God bless all our losses,"
Better suits with our degree.
Listen, gentle—aye, and simple ! listen, children
on the knee !

II

Green the land is where my daily
Steps in jocund childhood played,
Dimpled close with hill and valley,
Dappled very close with shade ;
Summer-snow of apple blossoms running up from
glade to glade.

III

There is one hill I see nearer
In my vision of the rest ;
And a little wood seems clearer
As it climbeth from the west,
Sideway from the tree-locked valley, to the airy
upland crest.

IV

Small the wood is, green with hazels,
And, completing the ascent,
Where the wind blows and sun dazzles

AND HER POETRY

Thrills in leafy tremblement,
Like a heart that, after climbing, beateth quickly
through content.

V

Not a step the wood advances
O'er the open hill-top's bound ;
There, in green arrest, the branches
See their image on the ground :
You may walk beneath them smiling, glad with
sight and glad with sound.

VI

For you hearken on your right hand,
How the birds do leap and call
In the greenwood, out of sight and
Out of reach and fear of all ;
And the squirrels crack the filberts through their
cheerful madrigal.

VII

On your left, the sheep are cropping
The slant grass and daisies pale,
And five apple-trees stand dropping
Separate shadows toward the vale,
Over which, in choral silence, the hills look you
their " All hail ! "

VIII

Far out, kindled by each other,
Shining hills on hills arise,
Close as brother leans to brother
When they press beneath the eyes
Of some father praying blessings from the gifts of
paradise.

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IX

While beyond, above them mounted,
And above their woods also,
Malvern hills, for mountains counted
Not unduly, loom a-row—
Keepers of Piers Plowman's visions through the
sunshine and the snow.¹

X

Yet, in childhood, little prized I
The fair walk and far survey :
'Twas a straight walk unadvised by
The least mischief worth a nay ;
Up and down—as dull as grammar on the eve of
holiday.

XI

But the wood, all close and clenching
Bough in bough and root in root,—
No more sky (for over-branching)
At your head than at your foot,—
Oh, the wood drew me within it, by a glamour
past dispute.

XII

Few and broken paths showed through it,
Where the sheep had tried to run,—
Forced with snowy wool to strew it
Round the thickets, when anon
They, with silly thorn-pricked noses, bleated back
into the sun.

¹ The Malvern Hills of Worcestershire are the scene of Langland's Visions, and thus present the earliest classic ground of English poetry.

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XIII

But my childish heart beat stronger
Than those thickets dared to grow :
I could pierce them ! *I* could longer
Travel on, methought, than so.
Sheep for sheep-paths ! braver children climb and
creep where they would go.

XIV

And the poets wander, said I,
Over places all as rude :
Bold Rinaldo's lovely lady
Sate to meet him in a wood :
Rosalinda, like a fountain, laughed out pure with
solitude.

XV

And if Chaucer had not travelled
Through a forest by a well,
He had never dreamt nor marvelled
At those ladies fair and fell
Who lived smiling without loving in their island-
citadel.

XVI

Thus I thought of the old singers,
And took courage from their song,
Till my little struggling fingers
Tore asunder gyve and thong
Of the brambles which entrapped me, and the
barrier branches strong.

XVII

On a day, such pastime keeping,
With a fawn's heart debonair,
Under-crawling, overleaping

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Thorns that prick and boughs that bear,
I stood suddenly astonied—I was gladdened
unaware.

XVIII

From the place I stood in, floated
Back the covert dim and close,
And the open ground was coated
Carpet-smooth with grass and moss,
And the blue-bell's purple presence signed it
worthily across.

XIX

Here a linden-tree stood, bright'ning
All adown its silver rind ;
For as some trees draw the lightning,
So this tree, unto my mind,
Drew to earth the blessed sunshine from the sky
where it was shrined.

XX

Tall the linden-tree, and near it
An old hawthorn also grew ;
And wood-ivy like a spirit
Hovered dimly round the two,
Shaping thence that bower of beauty which I sing
of thus to you.

XXI

'Twas a bower for garden fitter
Than for any woodland wide ;
Though a fresh and dewy glitter
Struck it through from side to side,
Shaped and shaven was the freshness, as by
garden-cunning plied.

AND HER POETRY

XXII

Oh, a lady might have come there,
Hooded fairly like her hawk,
With a book or lute in summer,
And a hope of sweeter talk,—
Listening less to her own music than for footsteps
on the walk.

XXIII

But that bower appeared a marvel
In the wildness of the place ;
With such seeming art and travail,
Finely fixed and fitted was
Leaf to leaf, the dark-green ivy, to the summit
from the base.

XXIV

And the ivy veined and glossy
Was enwrought with eglantine ;
And the wild hop fibred closely,
And the large-leaved columbine,
Arch of door and window mullion, did right
sylvanly entwine.

XXV

Rose-trees either side the door were
Growing lithe and growing tall,
Each one set a summer warder
For the keeping of the hall,—
With a red rose and a white rose, leaning, nodding
at the wall.

XXVI

As I entered—mosses hushing
Stole all noises from my foot ;
And a green elastic cushion,

ELIZABETH BROWNING

Clasped within the linden's root,
Took me in a chair of silence very rare and
absolute.

XXVII

All the floor was paved with glory,
Greenly, silently inlaid
(Through quick motions made before me),
With fair counterparts in shade
Of the fair serrated ivy-leaves which slanted
overhead.

XXVIII

"Is such pavement in a palace?"
So I questioned in my thought.
The sun, shining through the chalice
Of the red rose hung without,
Threw within a red libation, like an answer to my
doubt.

XXIX

At the same time, on the linen
Of my childish lap there fell
Two white may-leaves, downward winning
Through the ceiling's miracle,
From a blossom, like an angel, out of sight yet
blessing well.

XXX

Down to floor and up to ceiling
Quick I turned my childish face,
With an innocent appealing
For the secret of the place
To the trees, which surely knew it, in partaking
of the grace.

AND HER POETRY

XXXI

Where's no foot of human creature,
How could reach a human hand ?
And if this be work of nature,
Why has nature turned so bland,
Breaking off from other wild work ? It was hard
to understand.

XXXII

Was she weary of rough-doing, —
Of the bramble and the thorn ?
Did she pause in tender rueing
Here of all her sylvan scorn ?
Or, in mock of art's deceiving, was the sudden
mildness worn ?

XXXIII

Or could this same bower (I fancied)
Be the work of Dryad strong,
Who, surviving all that chancèd
In the world's old pagan wrong,
Lay hid, feeding in the woodland on the last true
poet's song ?

XXXIV

Or was this the house of fairies,
Left, because of the rough ways,
Unassoiled by Ave Marys
Which the passing pilgrim prays,
And beyond Saint Catherine's chiming on the
blessèd Sabbath days ?

XXXV

So, young muser, I sate listening
To my fancy's wildest word.
On a sudden, through the glistening

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Leaves around, a little stirred,
Came a sound, a sense of music, which was rather
felt than heard.

XXXVI

Softly, finely, it enwound me ;
From the world it shut me in,—
Like a fountain, falling round me,
Which with silver waters thin
Clips a little water Naiad sitting smilingly within.

XXXVII

Whence the music came, who knoweth ?
I know nothing. But indeed
Pan or Faunus never bloweth
So much sweetness from a reed
Which has sucked the milk of waters at the oldest
river-head.

XXXVIII

Never lark the sun can waken
With such sweetness ! when the lark,
The high planets overtaking
In the half-*evanished* Dark,
Casts his singing to their singing, like an arrow to
the mark.

XXXIX

Never nightingale so singeth :
Oh, she leans on thorny tree,
And her poet-song she flingeth
Over pain to victory !
Yet she never sings such music,—or she sings it
not to me.

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XL

Never blackbirds, never thrushes,
Nor small finches sing as sweet,
When the sun strikes through the bushes
To their crimson clinging feet,
And their pretty eyes look sideways to the summer
 heavens complete.

XLI

If it *were* a bird, it seemèd,
Most like Chaucer's, which, in sooth,
He of green and azure dreamèd,
While it sate in spirit-ruth
On that bier of a crowned lady, singing nigh her
 silent mouth.

XLII

If it *were* a bird !—ah, sceptic,
Give me “yea ” or give me “nay ”—
Though my soul were nympholeptic,
As I heard that virèlay,
You may stoop your pride to pardon, for my sin
 is far away.

XLIII

I rose up in exaltation
And an inward trembling heat,
And (it seemed) in geste of passion
Dropped the music to my feet
Like a garment rustling downwards !—such a
 silence followed it.

XLIV

Heart and head beat through the quiet
Full and heavily, though slower.
In the song, I think, and by it,

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Mystic Presences of power
Had up-snatched me to the Timeless, then returned
me to the Hour.

XLV

In a child-abstraction lifted,
Straightway from the bower I past,
Foot and soul being dimly drifted
Through the greenwood, till, at last,
In the hill-top's open sunshine I all consciously
was cast.

XLVI

Face to face with the true mountains
I stood silently and still,
Drawing strength from fancy's dauntings,
From the air about the hill,
And from Nature's open mercies, and most debonair
goodwill.

XLVII

Oh, the golden-hearted daisies
Witnessed there, before my youth,
To the truth of things, with praises
Of the beauty of the truth,
And I woke to Nature's real, laughing joyfully
for both.

XLVIII

And I said within me, laughing,
I have found a bower to-day,
A green lusus—fashioned half in
Chance, and half in Nature's play—
And a little bird sings nigh it, I will nevermore
missay.

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XLIX

Henceforth, *I* will be the fairy
Of this bower not built by one ;
I will go there, sad or merry,
With each morning's benison,
And the bird shall be my harper in the dream-hall
I have won.

L

So I said. But the next morning,
(—Child, look up into my face—
'Ware, O sceptic, of your scorning !
This is truth in its pure grace !)
The next morning, all had vanished, or my
wandering missed the place.

LI

Bring an oath most sylvan holy,
And upon it swear me true—
By the wind-bells swinging slowly
Their mute curfews in the dew,
By the advent of the snowdrop, by the rosemary
and rue,—

LII

I affirm by all or any,
Let the cause be charm or chance,
That my wandering searches many
Missed the bower of my romance—
That I nevermore, upon it, turned my mortal
countenance.

LIII

I affirm that, since I lost it,
Never bower has seemed so fair ;
Never garden-creeper crossed it

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With so deft and brave an air—
Never bird sung in the summer, as I saw and
heard them there.

LIV

Day by day, with new desire,
Toward my wood I ran in faith,
Under leaf and over brier,
Through the thickets, out of breath—
Like the prince who rescued Beauty from the
sleep as long as death.

LV

But his sword of mettle clashèd,
And his arm smote strong, I ween,
And her dreaming spirit flashèd
Through her body's fair white screen,
And the light thereof might guide him up the
cedar alleys green.

LVI

But for me, I saw no splendour—
All my sword was my child-heart ;
And the wood refused surrender
Of that bower it held apart,
Safe as Œdipus's grave-place, 'mid Colonos' olives
swart.

LVII

As Aladdin sought the basements
His fair palace rose upon,
And the four-and-twenty casements
Which gave answers to the sun ;
So, in wilderment of gazing I looked up, and I
looked down.

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LVIII

Years have vanished since as wholly
As the little bower did then ;
And you call it tender folly
That such thoughts should come again ?
Ah, I cannot change this sighing for your smiling,
brother men !

LIX

For this loss it did prefigure
Other loss of better good,
When my soul, in spirit-vigour,
And in ripened womanhood,
Fell from visions of more beauty than an arbour
in a wood.

LX

I have lost—oh, many a pleasure,
Many a hope, and many a power—
Studious health, and merry leisure,
The first dew on the first flower !
But the first of all my losses was the losing of the
bower.

LXI

I have lost the dream of Doing,
And the other dream of Done,
The first spring in the pursuing,
The first pride in the Begun,—
First recoil from incompleteness, in the face of
what is won—

LXII

Exaltations in the far light
Where some cottage only is ;
Mild dejections in the starlight,

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Which the sadder-hearted miss ;
And the child-cheek blushing scarlet for the very
shame of bliss.

LXIII

I have lost the sound child-sleeping
Which the thunder could not break ;
Something too of the strong leaping
Of the staglike heart awake,
Which the pale is low for keeping in the road it
ought to take.

LXIV

Some respect to social fictions
Has been also lost by me ;
And some generous genuflexions,
Which my spirit offered free
To the pleasant old conventions of our false
humanity.

LXV

All my losses did I tell you,
Ye, perchance, would look away ;—
Ye would answer me, " Farewell ! you
Make sad company to-day,
And your tears are falling faster than the bitter
words you say."

LXVI

For God placed me like a dial
In the open ground with power,
And my heart had for its trial
All the sun and all the shower !
And I suffered many losses,—and my first was of
the bower.

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LXVII

Laugh you ? If that loss of mine be
Of no heavy-seeming weight—
When the cone falls from the pine-tree
The young children laugh thereat ;
Yet the wind that struck it, riseth, and the tempest
shall be great.

LXVIII

One who knew me in my childhood
In the glamour and the game,
Looking on me long and mild, would
Never know me for the same.
Come, unchanging recollections, where those
changes overcame.

LXIX

By this couch I weakly lie on,
While I count my memories,—
Through the fingers which, still sighing,
I press closely on mine eyes,—
Clear as once beneath the sunshine, I behold the
bower arise.

LXX

Springs the linden-tree as greenly,
Stroked with light adown its rind ;
And the ivy-leaves serenely
Each in either intertwined ;
And the rose-trees at the doorway, they have
neither grown nor pined.

LXXI

From those overblown faint roses
Not a leaf appeareth shed,
And that little bud discloses

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Not a thorn's-breadth more of red
For the winters and the summers which have
passed me overhead.

LXXII

And that music overfloweth,
Sudden sweet, the sylvan eaves :
Thrush or nightingale—who knoweth ?
Fay or Faunus—who believes ?
But my heart still trembles in me to the trembling
of the leaves.

LXXIII

Is the bower lost, then ? who sayeth
That the bower indeed is lost ?
Hark ! my spirit in it prayeth
Through the sunshine and the frost,—
And the prayer preserves it greenly, to the last
and uttermost.

LXXIV

Till another open for me
In God's Eden-land unknown,
With an angel at the doorway,
White with gazing at His Throne,
And a saint's voice in the palm-trees, singing—
“ All is lost . . . and won ! ”

The command over melodious music, the spontaneous simplicity, and the haunting, underlying strain of sadness will strike the reader at once. The proneness to analyse at too great length the moral suggested is also evident.

The chief companion and friend of Elizabeth's childhood was her brother Edward, with whom,

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preferring his tutor to her own governess, she studied the classics, passing the time

On Horace' page, or Maro's sweeter lore ;
While one young critic, on the classic style,
Would sagely try to frown, and make the other smile.

If the story of her sitting reading Homer in the original at eight years old is not sufficiently authenticated, there can be no question as to her extraordinarily precocious powers. Pope's Homer at least she devoured at a very early age. Greek myth and legend possessed her ; and soon summer visitors to Hope End might have found the child under some shady tree in the park, her black pony forgotten for the nonce, poring over the leaves of the Greek dramatists or Plato, with all the diligence and perhaps more than the ardour of a student in an Oxford library. In her garden, the tending of which she always loved, at nine years old she made a " huge giant wrought of spade," named him " Hector, son of Priam," laid out his great figure and limbs in flowers, and half believed the disembodied soul of " old Hector, once of Troy " would come one day to take possession.

In her father's library she plunged into the world of books, and from wide and varied reading learnt not pedantry, but independence, not servility, but trust of her own instinct and her own reason. After her brother Edward went to school, she carried on her studies of the classics with a friend who lived near—the blind scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd. She would read

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aloud to him in Greek, the dramatists, and the writings of the early Fathers. "The Wine of Cyprus," a poem which will be quoted in another connection later on, gives a delightful picture of winged hours, spent by the blind scholar and the eager girl, deep in the works of the great masters. It was in these early years that Elizabeth Barrett laid the foundations of the wide culture which distinguishes her from most other women writers of her generation. The impress of the second of the main influences of her girlhood is far less prominent. For though, throughout her most receptive years she lived a free life, in the depths of the country, she was never a poet of nature. That she loved its beauties is evident from many a passage in her works. Few have seized on and conveyed so felicitously the essential features of English scenery as she has in the following passage, fragrant with memories of the country she rambled over as a child :

On English ground

You understand the letter,—ere the fall
How Adam lived in a garden. All the fields
Are tied up fast with hedges, nosegay-like ; -
The hills are crumpled plains, the plains parterres,
The trees, round, woolly, ready to be clipped,
And if you seek for any wilderness
You find, at best, a park. A nature tamed
And grown domestic like a barn-door fowl,
Which does not awe you with its claws and beak
Nor tempt you to an eyrie too high up,
But which, in cackling, sets you thinking of

AND HER POETRY

Your eggs to-morrow at breakfast, in the pause
Of finer meditation.

Rather say,
A sweet familiar nature, stealing in
As a dog might, or child, to touch your hand
Or pluck your gown, and humbly mind you so
Of presence and affection, excellent
For inner uses, from the things without.

Or in this :

Whoever lives true life, will love true love.
I learnt to love that England. Very oft,
Before the day was born, or otherwise
Through secret windings of the afternoons,
I threw my hunters off and plunged myself
Among the deep hills, as a hunted stag
Will take the waters, shivering with the fear
And passion of the course. And when at last
Escaped, so many a green slope built on slope
Betwixt me and the enemy's house behind,
I dared to rest, or wander, in a rest
Made sweeter for the step upon the grass,
And view the ground's most gentle dimplement
(As if God's finger touched but did not press
In making England), such an up and down
Of verdure,—nothing too much up or down,
A ripple of land ; such little hills, the sky
Can stoop to tenderly and the wheat-fields
climb ;
Such nooks of valleys lined with orchises,
Fed full of noises by invisible streams ;
And open pastures where you scarcely tell
White daisies from white dew,—at intervals
The mythic oaks and elm-trees standing out
Self-poised upon their prodigy of shade,—

ELIZABETH BROWNING

I thought my father's land was worthy too
Of being my Shakespeare's.

* * * *

I flattered all the beauteous country round,
As poets use, the skies, the clouds, the fields,
The happy violets hiding from the roads
The primroses run down to, carrying gold ;
The tangled hedgerows, where the cows push out
Impatient horns and tolerant churning mouths
'Twixt dripping ash-boughs,—hedgerows all alive
With birds and gnats and large white butterflies
Which look as if the May-flower had caught life
And palpitated forth upon the wind ;
Hills, vales, woods, netted in a silver mist,
Farms, granges, doubled up among the hills ;
And cattle grazing in the watered vales,
And cottage-chimneys smoking from the woods,
And cottage-gardens smelling everywhere,
Confused with smell of orchards.

But she was too early cut off from its influences to gain any deep philosophic insight into nature. She was more theorist than philosopher ; and where she passes beyond simple description it is not for interpretation, but for illustration.

Meanwhile from at least the age of eight the love of making verses possessed her ; and persisted until poetry became for her a life-object and a definite ambition. It is of some critical interest to notice that her early efforts, "The Battle of Marathon," and a volume published anonymously in 1826, "An Essay on Mind and other Poems," were both written under the influence of the school of Pope, still

AND HER POETRY

alive in out-of-the-way corners almost thirty years after the publication of the "Lyrical Ballads." The "Essay on Mind" gives evidence of remarkable range of learning for so young a writer—and beyond that need not concern us.

When she was about fifteen, Elizabeth suffered from an illness, brought on, it is thought, by a strain incurred while saddling her pony. It laid the foundations of a long period of invalidism in later years ; and its influence on her poetry is important. It meant that she was to pass from a life of seclusion in the country, to a life of seclusion on her couch in London. Thus, while a natural tendency to abstraction and theorising was encouraged, she was cut off from all possibility of the wide experience of life which direct contact with it alone can give.

The move to London was necessitated by money difficulties in which her father was already involved when her mother died in 1828. Hope End was sold, and after some unsettled years, at Sidmouth and in London, a house taken in Wimpole Street became her home till her marriage.

III

LONDON had for Elizabeth Barrett two great advantages. It afforded her opportunity to meet friends with her own interests, and it brought her into closer touch with current literature. The city did not, however, present itself at first in any very

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attractive aspect. For some time after their arrival she saw from her window

Fog only, the great tawny weltering fog,
Involve the passive city, strangle it
Alive, and draw it off into the void,
Spires, bridges, streets and squares, as if a sponge
Had wiped out London.

Presently she might discover its poetry and its inspiration, when it surprises "By a sudden sense of vision and of tune." Meantime a resource and interest which were independent of surroundings were hers. Severe winters that kept her a prisoner indoors were given up to strenuous study. She applied herself to her chosen profession with high seriousness of purpose, and a devotion which came from the deepest sense of the demands and responsibilities of the poet's calling.

Soon after the move to London there appeared one of the first of her poems which showed real mastery. It was a ballad, "The Romaunt of Margret." The idea underlying it is the old superstition that a forewarning of the approach of death is given to the man who sees an apparition of himself.

THE ROMAUNT OF MARGRET

I

I plant a tree whose leaf
The yew-tree leaf will suit ;
But when its shade is o'er you laid,
Turn round and pluck the fruit.

AND HER POETRY.

Now reach my harp from off the wall
Where shines the sun aslant.
The sun may shine and we be cold—
O hearken, loving hearts and bold,
Unto my wild romaunt,
Margret, Margret.

II

Sitteth the fair ladye
Close to the river side,
Which runneth on with a merry tone
Her merry thoughts to guide.
It runneth through the trees,
It runneth up the hill,
Nathless the lady's thoughts have found
A way more pleasant still.
Margret, Margret.

III

The night is in her hair
And giveth shade to shade,
And the pale moonlight on her forehead white
Like a spirit's hand is laid ;
Her lips part with a smile
Instead of speakings done :
I ween, she thinketh of a voice,
Albeit uttering none.
Margret, Margret.

IV

All little birds do sit
With heads beneath their wings :
Nature doth seem in a mystic dream,
Absorbed from her living things.
That dream by that ladye

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Is certes unpartook,
For she looketh to the high cold stars
With a tender human look.
Margret, Margret.

V

The lady's shadow lies
Upon the running river ;
It lieth no less in its quietness,
For that which resteth never :
Most like a trusting heart
Upon a passing faith,—
Or as, upon the course of life,
The stedfast doom of death.
Margret, Margret.

VI

The lady doth not move,
The lady doth not dream,
Yet she seeth her shade no longer laid
In rest upon the stream.
It shaketh without wind,
It parteth from the tide,
It standeth upright in the cleft moonlight,
It sitteth at her side.
Margret, Margret.

VII

Look in its face, ladye,
And keep thee from thy swoond !
With a spirit bold, thy pulses hold,
And hear its voice's sound.
For so will sound thy voice,
When thy face is to the wall ;
And such will be thy face, ladye,
When the maidens work thy pall.
Margret, Margret.

AND HER POETRY

VIII

“ Am I not like to thee ? ”—
The voice was calm and low ;
And between each word you might have heard
The silent forests grow.
“ *The like may sway the like,* ”
By which mysterious law
Mine eyes from thine and my lips from thine
The light and breath may draw.
Margret, Margret.

IX

“ My lips do need thy breath,
My lips do need thy smile,
And my pallid eyne, that light in thine
Which met the stars erewhile.
Yet go with light and life,
If that thou lovest one
In all the earth, who loveth thee
As truly as the sun,
Margret, Margret.”

X

Her cheek had waxèd white
Like cloud at fall of snow ;
Then like to one at set of sun
It waxèd red alsò ;
For love’s name maketh bold,
As if the loved were near.
And then she sighed the deep long sigh
Which cometh after fear.
Margret, Margret.

XI

“ Now, sooth, I fear thee not—
Shall never fear thee now ! ”
(And a noble sight was the sudden light

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Which lit her lifted brow.)
“Can earth be dry of streams ?
Or hearts, of love ? ” she said ;
“Who doubteth love, can know not love :
He is already dead.”

Margret, Margret.

XII

“I have” . . . and here her lips
Some word in pause did keep,
And gave the while a quiet smile,
As if they paused in sleep,—
“I have . . . a brother dear,
A knight of knightly fame !
I broidered him a knightly scarf
With letters of my name.

Margret, Margret.

XIII

“I fed his grey goss-hawk,
I kissed his fierce bloodhound,
I sate at home when he might come
And caught his horn’s far sound :
I sang him hunters’ songs,
I poured him the red wine—
He looked across the cup and said,
I love thee, sister mine.”

Margret, Margret.

XIV

IT trembled on the grass,
With a low, shadowy laughter ;
The sounding river which rolled for ever,
Stood dumb and stagnant after.
“Brave knight thy brother is !

AND HER POETRY

But better loveth he
Thy chaliced wine than thy chanted song,
And better both, than thee,
Margret, Margret."

XV

The lady did not heed
The river's silence while
Her own thoughts still ran at their will,
And calm was still her smile.
"My little sister wears
The look our mother wore :
I smooth her locks with a golden comb,
I bless her evermore."
Margret, Margret.

XVI

"I gave her my first bird,
When first my voice it knew ;
I made her share my posies rare,
And told her where they grew.
I taught her God's dear name
With prayer and praise, to tell—
She looked from heaven into my face,
And said, *I love thee well*,"
Margret, Margret.

XVII

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter :
You could see each bird as it woke and stared
Through the shrivelled foliage after.
"Fair child thy sister is !
But better loveth she
Thy golden comb than thy gathered flowers,
And better both, than thee,
Margret, Margret."

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XVIII

The lady did not heed
The withering on the bough :
Still calm her smile, albeit the while
A little pale her brow.
“ I have a father old,
The lord of ancient halls ;
An hundred friends are in his court,
Yet only me he calls.

Margret, Margret.

XIX

“ An hundred knights are in his court,
Yet read I by his knee ;
And when forth they go to the tourney show,
I rise not up to see.
'Tis a weary book to read,
My tryst's at set of sun,
But loving and dear beneath the stars
Is his blessing when I've done.”

Margret, Margret.

XX

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter ;
And moon and star, though bright and far,
Did shrink and darken after.
“ High lord thy father is !
But better loveth he
His ancient halls than his hundred friends,
His ancient halls, than thee,

Margret, Margret.”

XXI

The lady did not heed
That the far stars did fail :
Still calm her smile, albeit the while . . .

AND HER POETRY

Nay, but she is not pale !
“ I have a more than friend
Across the mountains dim :
No other's voice is soft to me,
Unless it nameth *him*.”
Margret, Margret.

XXII

“ Though louder beats mine heart
I know his tread again,
And his far plume ay, unless turned away,
For the tears do blind me then.
We brake no gold, a sign
Of stronger faith to be,—
But I wear his last look in my soul,
Which said, *I love but thee !* ”
Margret, Margret.

XXIII

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter ;
And the wind did toll, as a passing soul
Were sped by church-bell after ;
And shadows, 'stead of light,
Fell from the stars above,
In flakes of darkness on her face
Still bright with trusting love.
Margret, Margret.

XXIV

“ He *loved* but only thee !
That love is transient too :
The wild hawk's bill doth dabble still
I' the mouth that vowed thee true.
Will he open his dull eyes,

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When tears fall on his brow ?
Behold, the death-worm to his heart
Is a nearer thing than *thou*,
Margret, Margret."

XXV

Her face was on the ground—
None saw the agony,
But the men at sea did that night agree
They heard a drowning cry ;
And when the morning brake,
Fast rolled the river's tide,
With the green trees waving overhead,
And a white corse laid beside.
Margret, Margret.

XXVI

A knight's bloodhound and he
The funeral watch did keep ;
With a thought o' the chase he stroked its face
As it howled to see him weep.
A fair child kissed the dead,
But shrank before its cold ;
And alone yet proudly in his hall
Did stand a baron old.
Margret, Margret.

XXVII

Hang up my harp again !
I have no voice for song :
Not song, but wail, and mourners pale,
Not bards, to love belong.
O failing human love !
O light, by darkness known !
O false, the while thou treadest earth !
O deaf beneath the stone !
Margret, Margret.

AND HER POETRY

This was a poem of remarkable promise. The story unfolds directly in one sweep of inspiration. The music, weirdness, and melancholy add to the charm. The poet is dealing with a subject that attracts her by its suggestion of mysticism ; and her grotesqueness of diction is not here out of place.

This, and two other well-known ballads written a little later, "The Rhyme of the Duchess May" and "The Lay of the Brown Rosary," bear witness that she was once touched by Coleridge's magic wand. But her theory of poetry's mission stood in the way of her perfecting, as art, a form whose inspiration was the romantic past. She wrote :

My ballads prospered ; but the ballad's race
Is rapid for a poet who bears weights
Of thought and golden image.

And, for good or ill, she turned from the past to the present, from the world of romance to the world of reality.

Of external events during the early years in London there is little to tell. They were not, of course, without their importance, though she wrote of herself, "A bird in a cage would have as good a story." They were especially fruitful in the formation of friendships. One devoted friend and lifelong admirer gained at this time was Miss Mary Russell Mitford, of "Our Village" fame. To her we owe a description of the poet, who struck her most by her extreme youthfulness. Indeed, Miss Mitford had "some

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difficulty in persuading a friend . . . that the translator of the 'Prometheus' of Æschylus, the authoress of the 'Essay on Mind' was old enough to be introduced into company." The two kept up a close correspondence till Miss Mitford's death, some years after Mrs. Browning's marriage; and such was the attraction of Elizabeth Barrett's society that her elderly friend would willingly travel forty miles—a more serious undertaking then than now—to spend an hour with her.

Another great friendship must not be forgotten. Her distant cousin, John Kenyon, now began to play an important part in her life. He was for long an interesting figure in literary circles. "Giving up his early ambition to be known as an author, he devoted his life to making other authors happy." He watched his cousin's development with interest and unfailing kindness, introducing her to many famous writers, and acting generally as "guide, philosopher, and friend." He had been at school with the father of another rising young poet, Robert Browning.

It was through Mr. Kenyon that, on a red-letter day among so many entirely uneventful, Elizabeth Barrett met a writer for whom she had a great admiration—the poet Wordsworth. Landor was also present.

The youthful poet, trembling in soul and body as Wordsworth talked to her, little imagined that on his death in 1850, at least one influential literary paper, the "Athenæum,"

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would advocate her appointment as his successor in the Laureateship. Landor, estranged from kith and kin, was to find, in his old age, the truest of friends in Mr. and Mrs. Browning.

But, generally, Elizabeth Barrett's life now was one of great seclusion ; her days, however, were filled with literary labours, and the time of quiet was not unproductive. The volume which appeared in 1838 was the first published under her own name ; and while one critic hailed her at once as possessor of " many of the highest qualities of the divine art," by another her work was greeted as " especially welcome as an evidence of female genius and accomplishment." The reception accorded was partly due to its appearance at an auspicious moment. It came at a time when any signs of genuine power were very significant. The period of post-revolutionary reaction had checked enthusiasm and dulled inspiration. Browning had not yet caught the public ear ; Tennyson's star was barely above the horizon ; the importance of the volume was the greater since there was certainly no woman writer who could claim to stand in the front rank.

Adverse criticism, of course, accompanied the praise ; and it was accepted in a spirit of humility mingled with the confidence of one who was awakening to consciousness of power and the conviction of a message.

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IV

IN the very year of her success an illness, following on the breaking of a blood-vessel, left Elizabeth Barrett so frail that the risk of a winter in London was considered too great to run. Accordingly, accompanied by her favourite brother, Edward, she went to Torquay. An illness at the end of the second winter of such severity as to make it seem "utterly improbable, speaking humanly, that I ever should be any better" destroyed any immediate hope of return to London.

Her brother Edward was again with her in July 1840. One Saturday he and two friends went out together in a small sailing-boat. Night came, and the boat did not return. Suspense deepened into fear, and fear into practical certainty, when news was brought that a boat answering in description to the one they sailed in had been seen to sink in Babbicombe Bay. Three days later the bodies were recovered and no possible room for doubt was left.

For months his sister, already an invalid when the blow fell, was prostrate from grief. She lay bowed down by the sense of her loss, unable to forget that devotion to her had kept her brother at Torquay, and so in a way brought about his death. When Miss Mitford saw her in the autumn no one expected her to live more than a few months. Yet her indomitable spirit reasserted itself.

AND HER POETRY

She set herself resolutely to conquer by sheer hard work the insistency of haunting memories ; and, obliged to lie continually on her back, she took up again the broken threads of correspondence and composition. But she could never, to the end of her life, bear any reference to this terrible time.

From the depths of feeling awakened by the tragedy comes "The Cry of the Human." It pulsates with penetrating sympathy for common sorrows. Elizabeth Barrett's insight into universal emotion, coupled with the absolute sincerity which gave its expression individual appeal, was a large part of her genius. The vein of sadness, natural under the circumstances, runs all through her early lyrics.

THE CRY OF THE HUMAN

I

"There is no God," the foolish saith,
But none "There is no sorrow,"
And nature oft the cry of faith
In bitter need will borrow :
Eyes, which the preacher could not school,
By wayside graves are raised,
And lips say "God be pitiful,"
Who ne'er said "God be praised."
Be pitiful, O God !

II

The tempest stretches from the steep
The shadow of its coming,
The beasts grow tame, and near us creep,
As help were in the human ;

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Yet, while the cloud-wheels roll and grind,
We spirits tremble under !—
The hills have echoes, but we find
No answer for the thunder.
Be pitiful, O God !

III

The battle hurtles on the plains,
Earth feels new scythes upon her ;
We reap our brothers for the wains,
And call the harvest—honour ;
Draw face to face, front line to line,
One image all inherit,—
Then kill, curse on, by that same sign,
Clay, clay,—and spirit, spirit.
Be pitiful, O God !

IV

The plague runs festering through the town,
And never a bell is tolling,
And corpses, jostled 'neath the moon,
Nod to the dead-cart's rolling.
The young child calleth for the cup,
The strong man brings it weeping ;
The mother from her babe looks up,
And shrieks away its sleeping.
Be pitiful, O God !

V

The plague of gold strikes far and near,
And deep and strong it enters ;
This purple chimar which we wear
Makes madder than the centaur's :
Our thoughts grow blank, our words grow
strange,
We cheer the pale gold-diggers—

AND HER POETRY

Each soul is worth so much on 'Change,
And marked, like sheep, with figures.
Be pitiful, O God !

VI

The curse of gold upon the land
The lack of bread enforces ;
The rail-cars snort from strand to strand,
Like more of Death's white horses !
The rich preach " rights " and future days,
And hear no angel scoffing,—
The poor die mute—with starving gaze
On corn-ships in the offing.
Be pitiful, O God !

VII

We meet together at the feast,
To private mirth betake us ;
We stare down in the winecup, lest
Some vacant chair should shake us.
We name delight, and pledge it round—
" It shall be ours to-morrow ! "
God's seraphs, do your voices sound
As sad in naming sorrow ?
Be pitiful, O God !

VIII

We sit together, with the skies,
The steadfast skies, above us,
We look into each other's eyes,
" And how long will you love us ? "—
The eyes grow dim with prophecy,
The voices low and breathless,—
" Till death us part ! "—O words, to be
Our *best*, for love the deathless !
Be pitiful, O God !

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IX

We tremble by the harmless bed
Of one loved and departed :
Our tears drop on the lips that said
Last night, " Be stronger-hearted ! "
O God,—to clasp those fingers close,
And yet to feel so lonely !—
To see a light upon such brows,
Which is the daylight only !
Be pitiful, O God !

X

The happy children come to us,
And look up in our faces :
They ask us—Was it thus, and thus,
When we were in their places ?—
We cannot speak ;—we see anew
The hills we used to live in,
And feel our mother's smile press through
The kisses she is giving.
Be pitiful, O God !

XI

We pray together at the kirk,
For mercy, mercy, solely :
Hands weary with the evil work,
We lift them to the Holy.
The corpse is calm below our knee,
Its spirit, bright before Thee—
Between them, worse than either, we—
Without the rest of glory !
Be pitiful, O God !

XII

We leave the communing of men,
The murmur of the passions,

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And live alone, to live again
With endless generations.
Are we so brave ?—The sea and sky
In silence lift their mirrors,
And, glassed therein, our spirits high
Recoil from their own terrors.
Be pitiful, O God !

XIII

We sit on hills our childhood wist,
Woods, hamlets, streams, beholding :
The sun strikes through the farthest mist,
The city's spire to golden.
The city's golden spire it was,
When hope and health were strongest,
But now it is the churchyard grass
We look upon the longest.
Be pitiful, O God !

XIV

And soon all vision waxeth dull—
Men whisper, " He is dying " :
We cry no more " Be pitiful ! "
We have no strength for crying.
No strength, no need. Then, soul of mine,
Look up and triumph rather—
Lo, in the depth of God's Divine,
The Son adjures the Father,
BE PITIFUL, O GOD !

The deadening power of a great calamity, that, as Oliver Wendell Holmes says, " stains backward through all the leaves we have turned over in the book of life, before its blot of tears or of blood is dry on the page we are turning,"

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withering the blossoms of past joys with its touch and making fresh ones seem not worth the gathering, finds pathetic expression in the sonnet "Irreparableness."

IRREPARABLENESS

I have been in the meadows all the day
And gathered there the nosegay that you see,
Singing within myself as a bird or bee
When such do field-work on a morn of May.
But now I look upon my flowers, decay
Has met them in my hands more fatally
Because more warmly clasped,—and sobs are free
To come instead of songs. What do you say,
Sweet counsellors, dear friends? that I should go
Back straightway to the fields, and gather more?
Another, sooth, may do it,—but not I!
My heart is very tired, my strength is low,
My hands are full of blossoms plucked before,
Held dead within them till myself shall die.

Another, "Grief," is poignant and penetrating, and, generally, striking in expression.

GRIEF

I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless ;
That only men incredulous of despair,
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness
In souls, as countries, lieth silent-bare
Under the blanching, vertical eye-glare
Of the absolute Heavens. Deep-hearted man, express
Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death :—

AND HER POETRY

Most like a monumental statue set
In everlasting watch and moveless woe,
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.
Touch it : the marble eyelids are not wet ;
If it could weep, it could arise and go.

The spirit in which Elizabeth Barrett set herself to face life again may be illustrated by one more sonnet.

WORK

What are we set on earth for ? Say, to toil ;
Nor seek to leave thy tending of the vines,
For all the heat o' the day, till it declines,
And Death's mild curfew shall from work assoil.
God did anoint thee with His odorous oil,
To wrestle, not to reign ; and He assigns
All thy tears over, like pure crystallines,
For younger fellow workers of the soil
To wear for amulets. So others shall
Take patience, labour, to their heart and hand,
From thy hand, and thy heart, and thy brave cheer,
And God's grace fructify through thee to all.
The least flower, with a brimming cup, may stand,
And share its dewdrop with another near.

The three are interesting as examples of the early work of the author of the " Sonnets from the Portuguese." If the inspiration is not equally sustained, that they contain fine lines and some beautiful imagery will be readily admitted. They are not unworthy of the apprenticeship of the hand that penned the later series.

In spite of natural longing to get away from

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Torquay, it was not till September 1841 that it was possible for the journey to London to be undertaken. Then it was only the invalid's determination and strength of will that carried her through in the face of all opposition.

Once installed in her father's house in Wimpole Street again, in the two adjoining rooms which were to be practically a prison for four years, she threw herself with keen zest into her literary work. Often for long together she could see no one but the members of her family or most intimate friends. Journeys from bed to couch in a half-darkened room were the utmost she could accomplish. Yet she put away all complaining as unworthy, and bade herself

... like a cheerful traveller take the road,
Singing beside the hedge. What if the bread
Be bitter in thine inn, and thou unshod
To meet the flints? At least it may be said
"Because the way is *short*, I thank Thee, God."

Hardly a murmur or a regret escapes in letters or poems. "Probably," wrote one who knew her well, "there never was a greater instance of the power of genius over the weakness of the flesh." Her cheerfulness, courage, and persevering devotion to her art were unfailing, under circumstances that would have reduced any less courageous woman, at best, to a resigned acceptance of uselessness and impotence. She contributed a series of essays on "The Greek Christian Poets" to the "Athenæum," with

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occasional poems to that and other periodicals, and she began to prepare another collection of her works. She maintained a lively interest in the arrangements made for her comfort. Undaunted even by an upheaval savouring of spring-cleaning, she entered with zest into her brothers' devices for converting her bedroom into a study, the bedroom furniture being laden with shelves of books, or adorned with busts of the poets. Outside her window were such plants as careful tending could persuade to grow in the London atmosphere. They spoke to the invalid, in imagination, of loved woods and fields ; but her retrospection was untinged by any murmuring comparisons. In home affections, reading, and her own thoughts she found happiness enough.

The advent of a spaniel, a present from Miss Mitford, was an event of great importance in the recluse's life. The record of his faithful companionship is handed down and his name immortalised in the poem "To Flush, my Dog." It is a graceful tribute to canine affection, not without its pathos.

TO FLUSH, MY DOG

I

Loving friend, the gift of one
Who her own true faith has run
Through thy lower nature,
Be my benediction said
With my hand upon thy head,
Gentle fellow creature !

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II

Like a lady's ringlets brown,
Flow thy silken ears adown
 Either side demurely
Of thy silver-suited breast,
Shining out from all the rest
 Of thy body purely.

III

Darkly brown thy body is,
Till the sunshine striking this
 Alchemize its dullness,
When the sleek curls manifold
Flash all over into gold,
 With a burnished fullness.

IV

Underneath my stroking hand,
Startled eyes of hazel bland
 Kindling, growing larger,
Up thou leapest with a spring,
Full of prank and curveting,
 Leaping like a charger.

V

Leap ! thy broad tail waves alight,
Leap ! thy slender feet are bright,
 Canopied in fringes ;
Leap—those tasselled ears of thine
Flicker strangely, fair and fine,
 Down their golden inches.

VI

Yet, my pretty, sportive friend,
Little is't to such an end
 That I praise thy rareness !

AND HER POETRY

Other dogs may be thy peers
Haply in these drooping ears,
And this glossy fairness.

VII

But of *thee* it shall be said,
This dog watched beside a bed
Day and night unwearied,—
Watched within a curtained room,
Where no sunbeam brake the gloom
Round the sick and dreary.

VIII

Roses, gathered for a vase,
In that chamber died apace,
Beam and breeze resigning ;
This dog only, waited on,
Knowing that when light is gone
Love remains for shining.

IX

Other dogs in thymy dew
Tracked the hares and followed through
Sunny moor or meadow ;
This dog only, crept and crept
Next a languid cheek that slept,
Sharing in the shadow.

X

Other dogs of loyal cheer
Bounded at the whistle clear,
Up the woodside hieing ;
This dog only, watched in reach
Of a faintly uttered speech,
Or a louder sighing.

ELIZABETH BROWNING

XI

And if one or two quick tears
Dropped upon his glossy ears,
Or a sigh came double,—
Up he sprang in eager haste,
Fawning, fondling, breathing fast
In a tender trouble.

XII

And this dog was satisfied
If a pale thin hand would glide
Down his dewlaps sloping,—
Which he pushed his nose within,
After,—platforming his chin
On the palm left open.

XIII

This dog, if a friendly voice
Call him now to blyther choice
Than such chamber-keeping,
“Come out ! ” praying from the door,—
Presseth backward as before,
Up against me leaping.

XIV

Therefore to this dog will I,
Tenderly not scornfully,
Render praise and favour :
With my hand upon his head,
Is my benediction said
Therefore, and for ever.

XV

And because he loves me so,
Better than his kind will do
Often, man or woman,

AND HER POETRY

Give I back more love again
Than dogs often take of men,
Leaning from my Human.

XVI

Blessings on thee, dog of mine,
Pretty collars make thee fine,
Sugared milk make fat thee !
Pleasures wag on in thy tail,
Hands of gentle motion fail
Nevermore, to pat thee !

XVII

Downy pillow take thy head,
Silken coverlid bestead,
Sunshine help thy sleeping !
No fly's buzzing wake thee up,
No man break thy purple cup,
Set for drinking deep in.

XVIII

Whiskered cats aointed flee,
Sturdy stoppers keep from thee
Cologne distillations ;
Nuts lie in thy path for stones,
And thy feast-day macaroons
Turn to daily rations !

XIX

Mock I thee, in wishing weal ?—
Tears are in my eyes to feel
Thou art made so straitly,
Blessing needs must straiten too,—
Little canst thou joy or do,
Thou who lovest *greatly*.

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XX

Yet be blessèd to the height
Of all good and all delight
Pervious to thy nature ;
Only *loved* beyond that line,
With a love that answers thine,
Loving fellow creature !

It is gratifying to be able to add that, when Miss Barrett made her almost miraculous journey to Italy after her marriage, Flush went with the travellers and became an honoured member of the Casa Guidi household.

Another poem, also occasional in origin, but deservedly permanent in fame, was written on the reception of a present of wine from Mr. Boyd, who was now living in London. The wine reminds the poet of the draughts from the perennial fountain of classic literature of which she and the donor had drunk deep together long ago ; and its praise is turned with felicitous touch into a song in honour of " memories more delicious than the wine," and full, moreover, of critical acumen.

WINE OF CYPRUS

I

If old Bacchus were the speaker
He would tell you with a sigh,
Of the Cyprus in this beaker
I am sipping like a fly,—

AND HER POETRY

Like a fly or gnat on Ida
At the hour of goblet-pledge,
By queen Juno brushed aside, a
Full white arm-sweep, from the edge.

II

Sooth, the drinking should be ampler
When the drink is so divine,
And some deep-mouthed Greek exemplar
Would become your Cyprus wine :
Cyclops' mouth might plunge aright in,
While his one eye over-leered—
Nor too large were mouth of Titan,
Drinking rivers down his beard.

III

Pan might dip his head so deep in
That his ears alone pricked out,
Fauns around him, pressing, leaping,
Each one pointing to his throat :
While the Naiads, like Bacchantes,
Wild, with urns thrown out to waste,
Cry,—“ O earth, that thou wouldst grant us
Springs to keep, of such a taste ! ”

IV

But for me, I am not worthy
After gods and Greeks to drink,
And my lips are pale and earthy
To go bathing from this brink :
Since you heard them speak the last time
They have faded from their blooms,
And the laughter of my pastime
Has learnt silence at the tombs.

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V

Ah, my friend ! the antique drinkers
Crowned the cup and crowned the brow.
Can I answer the old thinkers
In the forms they thought of, now ?
Who will fetch from garden-closes
Some new garlands while I speak,
That the forehead, crowned with roses,
May strike scarlet down the cheek ?

VI

Do not mock me ! with my mortal
Suits no wreath again, indeed ;
I am sad-voiced as the turtle
Which Anacreon used to feed :
Yet as that same bird demurely
Wet her beak in cup of his
So, without a garland, surely
I may touch the brim of this.

VII

Go,—let others praise the Chian !
This is soft as Muses' string,
This is tawny as Rhea's lion,
This is rapid as his spring,
Bright as Paphia's eyes e'er met us,
Light as ever trod her feet !
And the brown bees of Hymettus
Make their honey not so sweet.

VIII

Very copious are my praises,
Though I sip it like a fly !—
Ah—but, sipping,—times and places
Change before me suddenly :

AND HER POETRY

As Ulysses' old libation

Drew the ghosts from every part,
So your Cyprus wine, dear Grecian,
Stirs the Hades of my heart.

IX

And I think of those long mornings
Which my thought goes far to seek,
When, betwixt the folio's turnings,
Solemn flowed the rhythmic Greek :
Past the pane the mountain spreading,
Swept the sheep-bell's tinkling noise,
While a girlish voice was reading,
Somewhat low for *ai*'s and *oi*'s.

X

Then, what golden hours were for us !—
While we sate together there,
How the white vests of the chorus
Seemed to wave up a live air !
How the cothurns trod majestic
Down the deep iambic lines,
And the rolling anapæstic
Curled like vapour over shrines !

XI

Oh, our Æschylus, the thunderous !
How he drove the bolted breath
Through the cloud, to wedge it ponderous
In the gnarlèd oak beneath.
Oh, our Sophocles, the royal,
Who was born to monarch's place,
And who made the whole world loyal,
Less by kingly power than grace.

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XII

Our Euripides, the human,
With his droppings of warm tears,
And his touches of things common
Till they rose to touch the spheres !
Our Theocritus, our Bion,
And our Pindar's shining goals !—
These were cup-bearers undying,
Of the wine that's meant for souls :

XIII

And my Plato, the divine one,
If men know the gods aright
By their motions as they shine on
With a glorious trail of light !—
And your noble Christian bishops,
Who mouthed grandly the last Greek !
Though the sponges on their hyssops
Were distent with wine—too weak.

XIV

Yet, your Chrysostom, you praised him
As a liberal mouth of gold ;
And your Basil, you upraised him
To the height of speakers old.
And we both praised Heliodorus
For his secret of pure lies,—
Who forged first his linkèd stories
In the heat of lady's eyes.

XV

And we both praised your Synesius
For the fire shot up his odes,
Though the Church was scarce propitious
As he whistled dogs and gods.

AND HER POETRY

And we both praised Nazianzen
For the fervid heart and speech :
Only I eschewed his glancing
At the lyre hung out of reach.

XVI

Do you mind that deed of Atè
Which you bound me to so fast,—
Reading “ De Virginitate,”
From the first line to the last ?
How I said at ending, solemn,
As I turned and looked at you,
That Saint Simeon on the column
Had had somewhat less to do ?

XVII

For we sometimes gently wrangled,
Very gently, be it said,
Since our thoughts were disentangled
By no breaking of the thread !
And I charged you with extortions
On the nobler fames of old—
Aye, and sometimes thought your Porsons
Stained the purple they would fold.

XVIII

For the rest—a mystic moaning
Kept Cassandra at the gate,
With wild eyes the vision shone in
And wide nostrils scenting fate.
And Prometheus, bound in passion
By brute Force to the blind stone,
Showed us looks of invocation
Turned to ocean and the sun.

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XIX

And Medea we saw burning
At her nature's planted stake :
And proud Œdipus fate-scorning
While the cloud came on to break—
While the cloud came on slow—slower,
Till he stood discrowned, resigned !—
But the reader's voice dropped lower
When the poet called him BLIND.

XX

Ah, my gossip ! you were older,
And more learned, and a man !—
Yet that shadow, the enfolder
Of your quiet eyelids, ran
Both our spirits to one level,
And I turned from hill and lea
And the summer-sun's green revel,
To your eyes that could not see.

XXI

Now Christ bless you with the one light
Which goes shining night and day !
May the flowers which grow in sunlight
Shed their fragrance in your way !
Is it not right to remember
All your kindness, friend of mine,
When we two sate in the chamber,
And the poets poured us wine ?

XXII

So, to come back to the drinking
Of this Cyprus,—it is well,
But those memories, to my thinking,
Make a better œnomet ;

AND HER POETRY

And whoever be the speaker,
None can murmur with a sigh,
That, in drinking from *that* beaker,
I am sipping like a fly.

As a complement to this poem, with its thorough, heartfelt appreciation of the ancient masters, we will quote the concluding poem of the 1844 volume, in which all the foregoing appeared. "The Dead Pan" was written on the reception from Mr. Kenyon of a translation of Schiller's "Götter Griechenlands." It was "partly founded on a well-known tradition mentioned in a treatise of Plutarch, . . . according to which, at the hour of the Saviour's agony, a cry of 'Great Pan is dead!' swept across the waves in the hearing of certain mariners—and the oracles ceased." Schiller, in the work referred to, laments with an artist's regret the fading away of beauty from the earth in an age for which the ancient myths have lost their meaning. Where "Helios in far-off ages, Majestic drove his golden tire," there now rolls, insensate, merely an orb of fire. Fancy, which once made all life beautiful, now lives in poetry alone. The complaint was not an unusual one for a poet at the close of the materialistic eighteenth century. The fairy-tales of science had not yet replaced the poetry that scientific investigation seemed to have driven out of nature. Keats lamented that analysis had spoiled the rainbow. Even Wordsworth bade the scientist avoid the poet's grave. But Elizabeth Barrett belonged to the group of

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poets whose golden age lies in the future. Such a regret was impossible alike to her optimistic idealism and to her religious convictions. And she never judged her art from the artistic standpoint alone. The moral issue was continually, as we have seen, to the forefront with her. Later on she was to bear the trumpet-call to Italy to remain no longer, "Of her our past, impassioned nympholept," sitting "still upon her tombs." Here, in the same spirit, she enters the field as champion of the present and the future, in a poem which has as its avowed object the vindication of the superior beauty, vitality, and inspirational power for modern poetry of the truths of Christianity over pagan mythology.

THE DEAD PAN

I

Gods of Hellas, gods of Hellas,
Can ye listen in your silence ?
Can your mystic voices tell us
Where ye hide ? In floating islands,
With a wind that evermore
Keeps you out of sight of shore ?
Pan, Pan is dead. .

II

In what revels are ye sunken,
In old Æthiopia ?
Have the Pygmies made you drunken,
Bathing in mandragora
Your divine pale lips, that shiver
Like the lotus in the river ?
Pan, Pan is dead.

AND HER POETRY

III

Do ye sit there still in slumber,
In gigantic Alpine rows ?
The black poppies out of number
Nodding, dripping from your brows
To the red lees of your wine,
And so kept alive and fine ?
Pan, Pan is dead.

IV

Or lie crushed your stagnant corpses
Where the silver spheres roll on,
Stung to life by centric forces
Thrown like rays out from the sun ?—
While the smoke of your old altars
Is the shroud that round you welters ?
Great Pan is dead.

V

“ Gods of Hellas, gods of Hellas,”
Said the old Hellenic tongue !
Said the hero-oaths, as well as
Poets’ songs the sweetest sung !
Have ye grown deaf in a day ?
Can ye speak not yea or nay —
Since Pan is dead ?

VI

Do ye leave your rivers flowing
All alone, O Naiades,
While your drenchèd locks dry slow in
This cold feeble sun and breeze ?—
Not a word the Naiads say,
Though the rivers run for ay.
For Pan is dead.

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VII

From the gloaming of the oak-wood,
O ye Dryads, could ye flee ?
At the rushing thunderstroke, would
No sob tremble through the tree ?—
Not a word the Dryads say,
Though the forests wave for aye.
For Pan is dead.

VIII

Have ye left the mountain places,
Oreads wild, for other tryst ?
Shall we see no sudden faces
Strike a glory through the mist ?
Not a sound the silence thrills
Of the everlasting hills.
Pan, Pan is dead.

IX

O twelve gods of Plato's vision,
Crowned to starry wanderings,—
With your chariots in procession,
And your silver clash of wings !
Very pale ye seem to rise,
Ghosts of Grecian deities,—
Now Pan is dead !

X

Jove, that right hand is unloaded,
Whence the thunder did prevail,
While in idiocy of godhead
Thou art staring the stars pale !
And thine eagle, blind and old,
Roughs his feathers in the cold.
Pan, Pan is dead.

AND HER POETRY

XI

Where, O Juno, is the glory
Of thy regal look and tread ?
Will they lay, for evermore, thee,
On thy dim, straight, golden bed ?
Will thy queendom all lie hid
Meekly under either lid ?
Pan, Pan is dead.

XII

Ha, Apollo ! floats his golden
Hair all mist-like where he stands,
While the Muses hang enfolding
Knee and foot with faint wild hands ?
'Neath the clanging of thy bow,
Niobe looked lost as thou !
Pan, Pan is dead.

XIII

Shall the casque with its brown iron,
Pallas' broad blue eyes, eclipse,
And no hero take inspiring
From the god-Greek of her lips ?
'Neath her olive dost thou sit,
Mars the mighty, cursing it !
Pan, Pan is dead.

XIV

Bacchus, Bacchus ! on the panther
He swoons,—bound with his own vines ;
And his Mænads slowly saunter,
Head aside, among the pines,
While they murmur dreamingly,
“ Evohe !—ah—evohe— ! ”
Ah, Pan is dead !

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XV

Neptune lies beside the trident,
Dull and senseless as a stone ;
And old Pluto deaf and silent
Is cast out into the sun :
Ceres smileth stern thereat,
" We *all* now are desolate—
Now Pan is dead."

XVI

Aphrodite ! dead and driven
As thy native foam, thou art ;
With the cestus long done heaving
On the white calm of thine heart !
Ai Adonis ! at that shriek,
Not a tear runs down her cheek—
Pan, Pan is dead.

XVII

And the Loves, we used to know from
One another, huddled lie,
Frore as taken in a snow-storm,
Close beside her tenderly,—
As if each had weakly tried
Once to kiss her as he died.
Pan, Pan is dead.

XVIII

What, and Hermes ? Time enthralleth
All thy cunning, Hermes, thus,—
And the ivy blindly crawleth
Round thy brave caduceus ?
Hast thou no new message for us,
Full of thunder and Jove-glories ?
Nay, Pan is dead,

AND HER POETRY

XIX

Crownèd Cybele's great turret
Rocks and crumbles on her head ;
Roar the lions of her chariot
Toward the wilderness, unfed.
Scornful children are not mute,—
" Mother, mother, walk afoot—
Since Pan is dead."

XX

In the fiery-hearted centre
Of the solemn universe,
Ancient Vesta,—who could enter
To consume thee with this curse ?
Drop thy grey chin on thy knee,
O thou palsied Mystery !
For Pan is dead.

XXI

Gods, we vainly do adjure you,—
Ye return nor voice nor sign !
Not a votary could secure you
Even a grave for your Divine !
Not a grave, to show thereby,
Here these grey old gods do lie.
Pan, Pan is dead.

XXII

Even that Greece who took your wages
Calls the obolus outworn ;
And the hoarse deep-throated ages
Laugh your godships unto scorn ;
And the poets do disclaim you,
Or grow colder if they name you—
And Pan is dead.

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XXIII

Gods bereavèd, gods belated,
With your purples rent asunder !
Gods discrowned and desecrated,
Disinherited of thunder !
Now, the goats may climb and crop
The soft grass on Ida's top—
Now, Pan is dead.

XXIV

Calm, of old, the bark went onward,
When a cry more loud than wind
Rose up, deepened, and swept sunward,
From the pilèd Dark behind ;
And the sun shrank and grew pale,
Breathed against by the great wail—
“ Pan, Pan is dead.”

XXV

And the rowers from the benches
Fell,—each shuddering on his face—
While departing Influences
Struck a cold back through the place ;
And the shadow of the ship
Reeled along the passive deep—
“ Pan, Pan is dead.”

XXVI

And that dismal cry rose slowly
And sank slowly through the air,
Full of spirit's melancholy
And eternity's despair !
And they heard the words it said—
“ PAN IS DEAD—GREAT PAN IS DEAD—
PAN, PAN IS DEAD.”

AND HER POETRY

XXVII

'Twas the hour when One in Sion
Hung for love's sake on a cross ;
When His brow was chill with dying,
And His soul was faint with loss ;
When His priestly blood dropped downward
And His kingly eyes looked throneward—
Then, Pan was dead.

XXVIII

By the love He stood alone in
His sole Godhead rose complete,
And the false gods fell down moaning,
Each from off his golden seat ;
All the false gods with a cry
Rendered up their deity—
Pan, Pan was dead.

XXIX

Wailing wide across the islands,
They rent, vest-like, their Divine !
And a darkness and a silence
Quenched the light of every shrine ;
And Dodona's oak swang lonely
Henceforth, to the tempest only,
Pan, Pan was dead.

XXX

Pythia staggered,—feeling o'er her,
Her lost god's forsaking look ;
Straight her eyeballs filmed with horror,
And her crispy fillets shook,
And her lips gasped through their foam
For a word that did not come.
Pan, Pan was dead.

XXXI

O ye vain false gods of Hellas,
 Ye are silent evermore !
 And I dash down this old chalice,
 Whence libations ran of yore.
 See, the wine crawls in the dust
 Wormlike—as your glories must,
 Since Pan is dead.

XXXII

Get to dust, as common mortals,
 By a common doom and track !
 Let no Schiller from the portals
 Of that Hades call you back,
 Or instruct us to weep all
 At your antique funeral.
 Pan, Pan is dead.

XXXIII

By your beauty, which confesses
 Some chief Beauty conquering you,—
 By your grand heroic guesses,
 Through your falsehood, at the True,—
 We will weep *not* . . ! earth shall roll
 Heir to each god's aureole—
 And Pan is dead.

XXXIV

Earth outgrows the mythic fancies
 Sung beside her in her youth ;
 And those debonair romances
 Sound but dull beside the truth.
 Phœbus' chariot-course is run :
 Look up, poets, to the sun !
 Pan, Pan is dead.

AND HER POETRY

XXXV

Christ hath sent us down the angels ;
And the whole earth and the skies
Are illumed by altar-candles
Lit for blessèd mysteries ;
And a Priest's hand, through creation,
Waveth calm and consecration—
And Pan is dead.

XXXVI

Truth is fair : should we forgo it ?
Can we sigh right for a wrong ?
God Himself is the best Poet,
And the Real is His song.
Sing His truth out fair and full,
And secure His beautiful.
Let Pan be dead.

XXXVII

Truth is large. Our aspiration
Scarce embraces half we be :
Shame, to stand in His creation,
And doubt truth's sufficiency !—
To think God's song unexcelling
The poor tales of our own telling—
When Pan is dead.

XXXVIII

What is true and just and honest,
What is lovely, what is pure—
All of praise that hath admonisht,
All of virtue, shall endure,—
These are themes for poets' uses,
Stirring nobler than the Muses,
Ere Pan was dead.

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XXXIX

O brave poets, keep back nothing,
Nor mix falsehood with the whole :
Look up Godward ; speak the truth in
Worthy song from earnest soul !
Hold, in high poetic duty,
Truest Truth the fairest Beauty.
Pan, Pan is dead.

Convinced, as Elizabeth Barrett was, that poetry is a vehicle for religious teaching, and as such fulfils its highest mission, she wrote "The Dead Pan" to emphasize the lesson contained in the last few stanzas. A contemporary critic took objection to them as, in too narrow a sense, specifically scriptural. If he was right, held their author, so much the worse for the poetry and the religion of the day ; but whether he was right or whether he was wrong, it was still the poet's business to work, not to please, but to purify, not to win applause from, but to elevate the minds of his readers. While it may still, therefore, be largely a matter of temperament which part of the poem makes the greatest appeal, the last stanzas deserve special attention for the insight they give into the poet's conception of her aims and her responsibilities.

The two poems just quoted form together an excellent illustration, both of the wide classical reading of the writer and of its influence upon her. It might have been expected that, living as she did a life largely shut off from all

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social intercourse, and being an omnivorous reader, the literature she produced would have belonged to the class that "smells of literature," have been markedly imitative in quality, and out of touch with the spirit of the age. As a matter of fact, nothing, under the circumstances, is more surprising than the absence of bookishness or dependence on authority in her writings. The reader must already have been struck by the originality both in form and mode of expression which is a most prominent feature of her work. This is due in part to the impulsive spontaneity which was at once her weakness and her strength. But it is also closely connected with the sympathetic sensitiveness which kept the secluded invalid in constant touch with the varied movements, literary, social, and political, of the life around her. Appreciation never for her meant imitation; and she continually looked at the past in the light of the future.

V

IT is an easy transition from the foregoing statement to the consideration of a poem in which Elizabeth Barrett for the first time definitely took her stand as a fighter in the social arena. The interest of "The Cry of the Children" is more than literary; and before dealing with it, it will be well to notice certain characteristics of the era from which it came.

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The nineteenth century was a time of upheaval in many directions. The reaction which inevitably followed the excesses of the French Revolution was only temporary ; and when it was exhausted the forces at the back of the movement, of which indeed the Revolution itself was but an incident, reasserted themselves. In England they found expression, as we have seen, mainly in the increased attention to social problems which marks the advance of democracy throughout the century ; in political movements tending in the same direction ; and in general, in a widening of sympathies everywhere with the suffering and the oppressed. To recall to the reader how widespread and diverse were the manifestations in literature of the influences at work, it will be enough to mention the names of such writers as Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens, Disraeli, and Kingsley.

A crying evil accompanying last century's progress in industrialism was the employment in mines and factories of women and children, under conditions so brutal and degrading as to be painful to read of. Elizabeth Barrett's attention was called to these by the report of a Commission to investigate the facts, on which her friend Mr. R. H. Horne had worked. Her ready sympathies were roused to indignation at the thought especially of the suffering children ; in a white heat of anger and compassion she wrote the following eloquent appeal that such a state of things should be endured no longer. As a poem its success was immediate. It

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undoubtedly hastened the passing of an Act of Parliament to remedy the evil ; and it takes its place deservedly beside Hood's " Song of the Shirt," among the classics of the dumb many who have been cheated of their birthright.

THE CRY OF THE CHILDREN

Φεῦ, φεῦ· τί προσδέρκεσθές μ' ὄμμασιν, τέκνα ;

Medea

I

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years ?

They are leaning their young heads against their
mothers,

And *that* cannot stop their tears.

The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,

The young birds are chirping in the nest,

The young fawns are playing with the shadows,

The young flowers are blowing toward the west—

But the young, young children, O my brothers,

They are weeping bitterly !

They are weeping in the playtime of the others,

In the country of the free.

II

Do you question the young children in the sorrow

Why their tears are falling so ?

The old man may weep for his to-morrow

Which is lost in Long Ago ;

The old tree is leafless in the forest,

The old year is ending in the frost,

The old wound, if stricken, is the sorest,

The old hope is hardest to be lost.

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But the young, young children, O my brothers,
Do you ask them why they stand
Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers,
In our happy Fatherland ?

III

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their looks are sad to see,
For the man's hoary anguish draws and presses
Down the cheeks of infancy.
"Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary ;
Our young feet," they say, "are very weak !
Few paces have we taken, yet are weary—
Our grave-rest is very far to seek.
Ask the aged why they weep, and not the children ;
For the outside earth is cold ;
And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering,
And the graves are for the old.

IV

"True," say the children, "it may happen
That we die before our time ;
Little Alice died last year—her grave is shapen
Like a snowball, in the rime.
We looked into the pit prepared to take her :
Was no room for any work in the close clay !
From the sleep wherein she lieth none will wake her,
Crying, 'Get up, little Alice, it is day.'
If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower,
With your ear down, little Alice never cries ;
Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her,
For the smile has time for growing in her eyes ;
And merry go her moments, lulled and stilled in
The shroud by the kirk-chime !
It is good when it happens," say the children
"That we die before our time."

AND HER POETRY

V

Alas, alas, the children ! they are seeking
Death in life, as best to have ;
They are binding up their hearts away from breaking
With a cerement from the grave.
Go out, children, from the mine and from the city,
Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do ;
Pluck your handfuls of the meadow cowslips pretty,
Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through !
But they answer, " Are your cowslips of the meadows
Like our weeds anear the mine ?
Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,
From your pleasures fair and fine !

VI

" For oh," say the children, " we are weary,
And we cannot run or leap ;
If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
To drop down in them and sleep.
Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping,
We fall upon our faces, trying to go ;
And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow ;
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring
Through the coal-dark, underground—
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round.

VII

" For, all day, the wheels are droning, turning,—
Their wind comes in our faces,—
Till our hearts turn,—our head, with pulses burning,
And the walls turn in their places ;

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Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,
Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,
All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
And all day, the iron wheels are droning,
And sometimes we could pray,
' O ye wheels ' (breaking out in a mad moaning),
' Stop ! be silent for to-day ! ' "

VIII

Aye ! be silent ! Let them hear each other breathing
For a moment, mouth to mouth !
Let them touch each other's hands, in a fresh
wreathing
Of their tender human youth !
Let them feel that this cold metallic motion
Is not all the life God fashions or reveals :
Let them prove their living souls against the notion
That they live in you, or under you, O wheels !—
Still, all day, the iron wheels go onward,
Grinding life down from its mark ;
And the children's souls, which God is calling
sunward,
Spin on blindly in the dark.

IX

Now tell the poor young children, O my brothers,
To look up to Him and pray ;
So the blessèd One who blesseth all the others,
Will bless them another day.
They answer, " Who is God that He should hear us,
While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred ?
When we sob aloud, the human creatures near us
Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word.

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And *we* hear not (for the wheels in their resounding)
Strangers speaking at the door :
Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him,
Hears our weeping any more ?

X

“ Two words, indeed, of praying we remember,
And at midnight's hour of harm,
' Our Father,' looking upward in the chamber,
We say softly for a charm.
We know no other words, except ' Our Father,'
And we think that, in some pause of angels' song,
God may pluck them with the silence sweet to
gather,
And hold both within His right hand which is
strong.
' Our Father ! ' If He heard us, He would surely
(For they call Him good and mild)
Answer, smiling down the steep world very purely,
' Come and rest with Me, My child.'

XI

“ But, no ! ” say the children, weeping faster,
“ He is speechless as a stone ;
And they tell us, of His image is the master
Who commands us to work on.
Go to ! ” say the children,—“ up in Heaven,
Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find.
Do not mock us ; grief has made us unbelieving—
We look up for God, but tears have made us
blind.”
Do you hear the children weeping and disproving,
O my brothers, what ye preach ?
For God's possible is taught by His world's loving,
And the children doubt of each.

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XII

And well may the children weep before you ?
They are weary ere they run ;
They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory
Which is brighter than the sun.
They know the grief of man, without its wisdom ;
They sink in man's despair, without its calm ;
Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom,
Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm,—
Are worn, as if with age, yet unretrievingly
The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.
Let them weep ! let them weep !

XIII

They look up, with their pale and sunken faces,
And their look is dread to see,
For they mind you of their angels in high places,
With eyes turned on Deity !—
“ How long,” they say, “ how long, O cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's
heart,—
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart ?
Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
And your purple shows your path !
But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath.”

At the end of her life, in a “ Song for the Ragged Schools of London,” Mrs. Browning made a similar, though less fervent, appeal for the opening of ragged schools for the—

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Ragged children, hungry-eyed,
Huddled up out of the coldness
On your doorsteps, side by side.

Even before "The Cry of the Children" it is evident that the whole weight of her convictions regarding life and art was drawing her inevitably into the modern field. Yet, though her interest in social questions and in politics was deep, its basis was always purely emotional. It resolved itself, whether in England or in Italy, into a generous, large-souled championship of the down-trodden and the injured. The injustice that touched her feelings caused her enthusiasm to leap into a blaze; and the fire that consumes the heart is the secret of her strength. It has been said, not wholly unfairly, that she only felt where she thought she thought. Certainly, feeling was uppermost. But until man is all intellect and politics have passed beyond the reach even of the leavening power of a pure and unselfish enthusiasm, this need not be read entirely in disparagement. The results meanwhile on her poetry are twofold. In the first place it is marked by absolute sincerity: the sentiment may be "over-strained and violent" at times, but it is never false. In the next place, the power of expression too often falls short of the inspiration: the primary consideration is what she has to say; and how it is said is second in importance. This is particularly the case in the later poems dealing with Italy, which will be considered presently.

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One more point must be dwelt on in connection with the 1844 volume before picking up again the threads of the story. Two of the poems quoted, "Wine of Cyprus" and "The Dead Pan," contain many instances of the peculiar rimes which Elizabeth Barrett frequently permitted herself to use; and which appear to justify a charge continually made against her, of slovenly workmanship, or at least of indifference. The reader will have no difficulty in finding plenty of illustrations. Thus in Stanza III. of "Wine of Cyprus" the following are used: "deep in . . . leaping," "out . . . throat," "Bacchantes . . . grant us." There are only two strict rimes in the stanza; and it is by no means an exception. In the light of the poet's serious view of her mission, it is easy to understand that any criticisms which put down faults in her work to carelessness were keenly felt by her. She was making experiments deliberately and of set purpose. Our earliest English poet, Chaucer, humorously lamented the paucity of rimes in the language; and many a poet, famed or unfamed, has doubtless suffered since from the same limitation. Elizabeth Barrett set herself to try to enlarge its possibilities. It is as a perfectly justifiable experiment that her attempt must be judged. But while she is freed from the charge of slovenly workmanship, it must be admitted that the device constitutes a flaw which obtrudes itself more and more on reperusal of the poems. That the trial,

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permissible in the first place, is not justified by its results, must be the final verdict. Coulson Kernahan goes so far as to say that, in the liberties she took in this and other ways, "Mrs. Browning . . . made what is known as 'poetic license' synonymous with the removal of the landmarks of art." He accuses her, further, of having exercised a very harmful influence over would-be poets of the succeeding generation; and avers that one of his commonest experiences as an editor was the reception of indignant letters of protest from contributors whose work he rejected, pointing out to him that the rimes to which he unreasonably took exception were used freely by her. That she herself came to agree with the critics is shown by the fact that she allowed herself far less license in this respect in her later writings.

The volume containing the poems we have been considering was indeed a noteworthy one. Many letters of congratulation reached the author. Among them came one which gave her special pleasure. It was from a writer already known to her as the friend of John Kenyon, and recognized as the possessor of genius greater than the critics as yet suspected—the poet Browning.

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VI

THE love-story of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett is one of the most romantic and beautiful in the history of men and women of letters. Here it shall be told chiefly as it is revealed in the work of Elizabeth Barrett herself.

Browning's first letter was marked by characteristic impetuosity and generous appreciation of her work. It was the beginning of a close correspondence between the two poets, and in May 1845 Browning paid her his first visit. Immediately afterward he declared his love. When it is remembered that Elizabeth Barrett was entering her fortieth year ; that for eight winters she had been a confirmed invalid ; and that both she and Browning believed that the future could hold nothing for her but years of invalidism like her past, we can understand the emotions with which she received his avowal. She answered his letter by the denials which it seemed nothing but her duty to give, for she could only feel :

We have met late—it is too late to meet,
O friend, not more than friend !
Death's forecome shroud is tangled round my feet,
And if I step or stir I touch the end.

In this last jeopardy
Can I approach thee, I, who cannot move ?
How shall I answer thy request for love ?
Look in my face and see.

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But the subject, forbidden once, was renewed. For Browning there was from the first but one aspect to the question. All that Elizabeth Barrett told him might be true : that her youth was past ; that recovery of strength seemed hopeless ; that his love for her must be an impediment to him in his future career ; that therefore it was her very love made her resolve that she " only could leave him." For all he had but one answer. It was not a question now that could be weighed and decided one way or the other. She might, rightly or wrongly, persist in her refusals ; it was not his to pass judgment on her decision, but whatever that might finally be, he too, no longer in his first youth, knew his own mind. He loved her, and would do so through all the years to come. And gradually love overcame doubt. In the light of a revelation it came to the invalid that her life still held undreamt-of possibilities ; that it might yet be hers to contribute directly to another's happiness ; to give as well as to receive. For her, the call to the future had come from Love, not Death. The story of what the awakening meant to her is told as no other can ever tell it in the " Sonnets from the Portuguese " :

I

I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,
Who each one in a gracious hand appears
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young :
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,

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The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair,
And a voice said in mastery while I strove, . .
"Guess now who holds thee?"—"Death," I said.
But there,
The silver answer rang, . . . "Not Death, but Love."

Yet with love acknowledged, Elizabeth Barrett still had fears that such as she had to offer could only be a hindrance to the man she loved. Her final surrender, after the renewal of doubt, finds expression in the following sonnet:

XVI

And yet, because thou overcomest so,
Because thou art more noble and like a king,
Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling
Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow
Too close against thine heart, henceforth to know
How it shook when alone. Why, conquering
May prove as lordly and complete a thing
In lifting upward, as in crushing low!
And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword
To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,—
Even so, Belovèd, I at last record,
Here ends my strife. If *thou* invite me forth,
I rise above abasement at the word.
Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth.

The realisation of past emptiness that came with the sense of present completion, as the light of this new love was shed over her life, is revealed in several of the sonnets.

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XXVI

I lived with visions for my company,
Instead of men and women, years ago,
And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know
A sweeter music than they played to me.
But soon their trailing purple was not free
Of this world's dust,—their lutes did silent grow,
And I myself grew faint and blind below
Their vanishing eyes. Then THOU didst come . . . to be,
Belovèd, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,
Their songs, their splendours (better, yet the same,
As river-water hallowed into fonts),
Met in thee, and from out thee overcame
My soul with satisfaction of all wants—
Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

Meanwhile, a marked improvement took place in the invalid's health during the summer of 1845. This, coupled with the feeling that it was worth while now to follow the doctor's advice and avoid the risks of a London winter, led to the projection of a plan for spending some months in Pisa. All arrangements were made, when suddenly, unaccountably, Mr. Barrett refused his consent. His daughter yielded at once, and the season was passed in England. Fortunately it was a very mild one. Elizabeth Barrett's health suffered less than usual. There seemed once more a prospect that if she could get to Italy for the succeeding winter she might yet be well. But there was only one way in which it appeared this could be secured, and that way her love and Browning's justified in the face of all difficulties. One main obstacle, however,

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had to be evaded or overcome. Mr. Barrett was fanatically opposed to the marriage of any of his daughters. In Elizabeth's case there certainly would have appeared some excuse for his opposition. But that the obstacle lay in his own obstinate prejudices and not in anything external was proved afterwards in a sister's and a brother's cases. Elizabeth Barrett, certain what would be the result of an attempt to gain his consent, physically incapable of enduring the storm she knew it would raise, decided that it was not her duty to go through the formal application. Fully conscious of what she was giving up, entirely confident of the sufficiency of compensation, she wrote another of the sonnets :

XXXV

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange
And be all to me ? Shall I never miss
Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss
That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,
When I look up, to drop on a new range
Of walls and floors . . . another home than this ?
Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is
Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change ?
That's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,
To conquer grief, tries more . . . as all things prove ;
For grief indeed is love and grief beside.
Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.
Yet love me—wilt thou ? Open thine heart wide
And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.

To avoid involving her sisters in their father's displeasure, Elizabeth kept the details of her plans even from them. On September 12, 1846,

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she walked quietly out of the house at Wimpole Street, followed only by Wilson, her faithful maid, and was married to Robert Browning at Marylebone Parish Church. A week later she again left the house to meet her husband, whom meanwhile she had not seen, and the two set out on their journey to Italy.

This part of Mrs. Browning's story may fittingly close with the quotation of a sonnet in which she gave completest expression to her ideal of a perfect love.

XLIII

How do I love thee ? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right ;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life !—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

The "Sonnets from the Portuguese," which have been drawn upon in illustration of the preceding narrative, were not shown to Browning till some months after their marriage. Mr. Gosse in "Critical Kit-Kats" has told the story as Browning told it to him :

"One day, early in 1847, their breakfast

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being over, Mrs. Browning went upstairs, while her husband stood at the window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of some one behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs. Browning, who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it ; and then she fled again to her own room."

Persuaded by him, she allowed the sonnets to be printed, first privately at Reading, and then in her 1850 collection of poems under their present title. Browning placed them nearest to Shakespeare's of any written since Shakespeare's day. Perhaps only Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "House of Life" can enter as a whole into serious rivalry with them. Certainly there is no other such series written by a woman. For this reason, if for no other, their interest and value would be unique.

Mrs. Browning was always at her best when frankly expressing personal emotions. Here, depth of feeling combined with the form chosen to express it, to produce a restraint which is frequently absent from her work. The demands of the sonnet purged away her tendency to diffuseness ; in this case supremely artist and woman united ; and she achieved expression, almost perfect technically, sincere, unreserved, yet unexaggerated, of the fervour and purity of her inmost soul.

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VII

THE journey to Italy was the beginning of a new life for Mrs. Browning. The freshness of her impressions lives for us in the record of Aurora's travels. She fell first beneath the spell of "fair, fantastic Paris," where the poets joined Mrs. Jameson, a great friend of both, whose astonishment at seeing the invalid was unbounded. She had left her on her couch for the winter, as she believed, a few weeks before. All went on together to Pisa, sailing from Marseilles to Genoa, watching as

The old miraculous mountains heaved in sight,
One straining past another along the shore,
The way of grand dull Odyssean ghosts,
Athirst to drink the cool blue wine of seas
And stare on voyagers,

their sides dotted with "brown convent towers," "little lighted villages," and waterfalls like streaks of silver, among the "myrtle and orange groves."

Mrs. Browning was delighted with the country and its associations. First Pisa, then Florence, charmed her. She became in health really transformed, as Mrs. Jameson said; able to take daily walks and drives and to make long excursions among the mountains. Passages of beautiful description occur in her work. Five vivid lines in "Casa Guidi Windows" recall a

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visit to Vallombrosa made in the summer of 1847. Here

. . . sublime

The mountains live in holy families,
And the slow pinewoods ever climb and climb
Half up their breasts, just stagger as they seize
Some grey crag, drop back with it many a time,
And straggle blindly down the precipice.

In the autumn of next year, rooms which became thenceforth the poets' headquarters were taken in Casa Guidi at Florence. The loveliness of the city appealed more at first to Mrs. Browning than its historical associations. It is vividly painted in a typical descriptive passage in "Aurora Leigh." The villa at Bellosguardo belonged to a friend whom the Brownings constantly visited :

I found a house at Florence on the hill
Of Bellosguardo. 'Tis a tower which keeps
A post of double-observation o'er
That valley of Arno (holding as a hand
The outspread city) straight toward Fiesole
And Mount Morello and the setting sun,
The Vallombrosan mountains opposite,
Which sunrise fills as full as crystal cups -
Turned red to the brim because their wine is red.
No sun could die nor yet be born unseen
By dwellers at my villa : morn and eve
Were magnified before us in the pure
Illimitable space and pause of sky,
Intense as angels' garments blanched with God,
Less blue than radiant. From the outer wall
Of the garden drops the mystic floating grey

AND HER POETRY

Of olive trees (with interruptions green
From maize and vine), until 'tis caught and torn
Upon the abrupt black line of cypresses
Which signs the way to Florence. Beautiful
The city lies along the ample vale,
Cathedral, tower and palace, piazza and street,
The river trailing like a silver cord
Through all, and curling loosely, both before
And after, over the whole stretch of land
Sown whitely up and down its opposite slopes
With farms and villas.

In Florence, husband and wife settled down to a life of quiet industry. It was their custom to write regularly every morning in separate rooms, and not to show their work to each other until it was completed. They lived simply, as their income required, getting their furniture even in piecemeal as funds came in from their poems. Browning, ever practical and never outgrowing the influence of strict early training, had a constitutional horror of even the smallest debt, and so prudent were the two poets that at the end of the year furnishing was still going on by slow degrees. Their caution must have set at rest the fears of those friends who, like Mrs. Jameson, had doubts at first as to the worldly wisdom of the pair of poet hearts and poet heads.

The ins-and-outs of the Brownings' various migrations from Florence need not be traced here. Apart from the events of contemporary Italian history, which will be dealt with later, there is little to record for a time that finds

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reflection in Mrs. Browning's poetry. In her home-life she came to know a happiness beyond that which she had ever dreamt might be her lot. Her chief pleasures outside were still those of friendly intercourse, and interchange of thought with congenial spirits. Sometimes a winter was spent in Rome, or a summer holiday was taken at the Baths of Lucca. An American, William Wetmore Story, who became very intimate with the poets, has left a delightful reminiscence of days spent picnicking among the woods and mountains near Lucca, where "under the great chestnuts, we read and talked the livelong day, the Lima, at our feet, babbling on clear and brown, over the stones, and the distant rock-ribbed peaks taking the changes of the hours."

In 1849 a fresh joy was brought into the Brownings' life by the birth of their son, Robert Wiedemann—afterwards given the pet-name of Penini. The inspired picture of Marian Erle's sleeping baby in "Aurora Leigh" is heightened, no doubt, by maternal feeling.

There he lay upon his back,
The yearling creature, warm and moist with-life
To the bottom of his dimples,—to the ends
Of the lovely tumbled curls about his face ;
For since he had been covered over-much
To keep him from the light-glare, both his cheeks
Were hot and scarlet as the first live rose
The shepherd's heart-blood ebb'd away into
The faster for his love. And love was here
As instant ; in the pretty baby-mouth,

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Shut close as if for dreaming that it sucked,
The little naked feet, drawn up the way
Of nestled birdlings ; everything so soft
And tender,—to the tiny holdfast hands,
Which, closing on a finger into sleep,
Had kept the mould of 't.

Ties of affection were thus binding the Brownings closer to the land of their adoption. Mrs. Browning's health forbade, in any case, frequent visits to England ; and she only came to London twice after her marriage. One thing always marred the pleasure of her sojourns there. Her father persistently refused to hold any intercourse with her. Several times she wrote to him and received no reply. A letter from her husband called forth a bitterly upbraiding answer, with which were returned all that she herself had written ; not one had been opened. This put an end to all hopes of reconciliation.

Mrs. Browning came more and more to love Florence as her own city, to rejoice at returning to the home of her happiest memories and sweetest associations. Before passing on to her work there, we will give two pictures, one of her, and one of her room at Casa Guidi. The first is that drawn by Mrs. Hawthorne, who, with her husband, visited the poets at Florence in 1858. They were shown into the drawing-room by Penini, and taken on to the balcony. " Then Mrs. Browning came out to us—very small, delicate, dark and expressive. She looked like a spirit. A cloud of hair falls on each side her face in curls, so as partly to veil her features.

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But out of the veil look sweet, sad eyes, musing and far-seeing and weird. Her fairy fingers seem too airy to hold, and yet their pressure was very firm and strong. The smallest possible amount of substance encloses her soul, and every particle of it is infused with heart and intellect. I was never conscious of so little unredeemed, perishable dust in any human being."

And the room shall be painted by another American friend and admirer, Miss Kate Field :—" They who have been so favoured " (as to know Casa Guidi) " can never forget the square ante-room, with its great picture and pianoforte, at which the boy Browning passed many an hour—the little dining-room covered with tapestry, and where hung medallions of Tennyson, Carlyle, and Robert Browning,—the long room filled with plaster casts and studies, which was Mr. Browning's retreat—and, dearest of all, the large drawing-room where *she* always sat. It opens upon a balcony filled with plants, and looks out upon the old iron-grey church of Santa Felice. There was something about this room that seemed to make it a proper and especial haunt for poets. The dark shadows and subdued light gave it a dreamy look, which was enhanced by the tapestry-covered walls and the old pictures of saints that looked out sadly from their carved frames of black wood. Large book-cases constructed of specimens of Florentine carving selected by Mr. Browning were brimming over with wise-looking books. Tables

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were covered with more gaily-bound volumes, the gifts of brother authors. Dante's grave profile, a cast of Keats's face and brow taken after death, a pen-and-ink sketch of Tennyson, the genial face of John Kenyon, Mrs. Browning's good friend and relative, little paintings of the boy Browning, all attracted the eye in turn, and gave rise to a thousand musings."

Mrs. Browning's marriage did not change her intellectual currents, and the influence of Browning the poet is little directly traceable in her work. But the wider experience of life that now opened to her seems to have inspired her with confidence for longer flights than hitherto ; her most ambitious poems belong to the first ten years of her married life. While these were in preparation, a collection appeared in which, beside the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," several previously published poems were gathered together. Among them are lyrics as representative of her essentially feminine genius as any that she wrote. It is her woman's sympathy and insight which are the inspiration of such an one as the following :

THE MASK

I

I have a smiling face, she said,
I have a jest for all I meet,
I have a garland for my head
And all its flowers are sweet,—
And so you call me gay, she said.

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II

Grief taught to me this smile, she said,
And Wrong did teach this jesting bold ;
These flowers were plucked from garden-bed
While a death-chime was tolled.
And what now will you say ?—she said.

III

Behind no prison-grate, she said,
Which slurs the sunshine half a mile
Live captives so uncomforted
As souls behind a smile.
God's pity let us pray, she said.

IV

I know my face is bright, she said,—
Such brightness, dying suns diffuse ;
I bear upon my forehead shed
The sign of what I lose,—
The ending of my day, she said.

V

If I dared leave this smile, she said,
And take a moan upon my mouth,
And tie a cypress round my head,
And let my tears run smooth,—
It were the happier way, she said.

VI

And since that must not be, she said,
I fain your bitter world would leave.
How calmly, calmly, smile the Dead,
Who do not, therefore, grieve !
The yea of Heaven is yea, she said.

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VII

But in your bitter world, she said,
Face-joy's a costly mask to wear.
'Tis bought with pangs long nourishèd,
And rounded to despair.
Grief's earnest makes life's play, she said.

VIII

Ye weep for those who weep ? she said—
Ah fools ! I bid you pass them by.
Go, weep for those whose hearts have bled
What time their eyes were dry.
Whom sadder can I say ? she said.

VIII

IT is characteristic that the work which is, with the exception of her sonnet series, the greatest achievement of Mrs. Browning's poetic career, should have been put forward avowedly as an experiment and a challenge. It was an attempt to win a new realm for poetry. Years before she had told John Kenyon of an ambition to write a poem dealing freely with modern questions, depicting contemporary life, and aiming at combining the functions of poetry and the popular novel. In 1856 she dedicated "Aurora Leigh" to the same "dearest cousin and friend," as "the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered." But before dealing with it,

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or considering how far the experiment is successful, we must revert to another poem which foreshadowed it, in the 1844 volume.

Space forbids the insertion of "Lady Geraldine's Courtship." Its relation to the age it came from and to the greater work it preceded may briefly be made clear. This early "Romance of the Age" is, like much of "Aurora Leigh," the outcome of Mrs. Browning's speculations on the social problems of her day. It tells of the wooing and winning of the noble Lady Geraldine by the poet Bertram, a son of the people. Almost destitute of plot, and as a story unconvincing, it is made the vehicle for a glowing, passionate declaration of the author's democratic sympathies. It is permeated by the time-spirit : so much so that the theme, commonplace in any case, has been almost robbed by time of its meaning. But for its rush of melody and glow of emotion, for the sheer beauty of many of its passages, it must live as long as the poet's name is remembered. Mrs. Browning said she wrote the last nineteen pages in one day, in response to a demand from her publisher ; and some of the fever-heat of inspiration has passed into the verse. For the student of her work the poem is of interest for another reason. It gives, before "Aurora Leigh," some embodiment of her social theories, her deepest convictions as to the place and power in society of poetry and its ideals ; and it gives it in a form clearly leading up to the experiment of the novel in verse.

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The first six books of "Aurora Leigh" were written chiefly at Casa Guidi. As a side-light on the methods of work of a poet who, like her husband, made poetic composition for long periods a matter of daily routine, it is interesting to learn that much of it was written in the intervals of teaching Penini, or of receiving visitors, during whose stay it was thrust away out of sight. The poem was completed rather hurriedly in London, where it was published. Within fifteen days the enthusiastic public had called for a second edition. Yet already for the majority it takes its place among the master-pieces that are tacitly acknowledged and neglected. Nevertheless it is a great achievement; and it has a unique interest, as will become apparent.

Aurora is the orphan child of an austere English father and a beautiful Italian mother. The story of her loneliness in her aunt's home in England, whither she is sent; of her gradual awakening to the sense of her vocation as a poet, through the "sweet familiar" influences of English country, and of the "world of books," veils, under a thin disguise, Mrs. Browning's own spiritual autobiography. Aurora therefore, at least when she serves the poet for self-revelation, is a living character; and the story of her development is of paramount interest. But with Romney Leigh, her cousin, master of Leigh Hall, the case is different. He is created to meet the demands of the parable which underlies the story, and has therefore far

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less vitality. He is so absorbed in schemes for the regeneration of society through material means ; so buried beneath the burden of social wrongs, that Aurora's idealism seems to him caprice. She refuses the love he offers her, and they take different paths to their own ends ; till they are brought through error and suffering to reconciliation, when each has learnt the other's lesson, and together the philanthropist, made blind that he may see, the poet awakened from her blindness, watch as the story closes the vision of the New Jerusalem that will arise when the ideal and the real, the practical worker and the dreamer of dreams, labour at its building side by side.

In thus indicating the main lines of the plot, one of its weak points as a novel has already been suggested, namely, the unreality that marks the characterisation. We have also pointed out one reason for this : the actors are so obviously created to fill their parts ; and this extends from many of the single characters to the representative groups which figure in its pages. Thus Romney is the compound of a personified utilitarian-socialistic philanthropy, and Lady Waldemar's individuality is sacrificed to the society type as Mrs. Browning conceived it ; while the contrasted pictures of the " classes " and the " masses," of " St. James in cloth of gold " and " St. Giles in frieze," who gather together to witness Romney's intended wedding with the drover's daughter, Marian Erle, are over-coloured and highly artificial.

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The fact is, Mrs. Browning had no power of dramatic projection. Her ignorance of the society she endeavoured to paint is apparent, and her characters are either the mouthpieces of her own philosophy, or are entirely unconvincing. And with this is involved another criticism. The interpretation of the parable, as even the brief summary reveals, is too near the surface; for she had not the dramatic instinct necessary to let the theories work themselves out in action, as a novel requires. We are not even the least persuaded that it is Aurora's poetic ideals and aspirations which keep her apart from Romney so long; though for the sake of the parable she has to be "converted" before her pride breaks down and she confesses her love. And further, the fact that the work was a thesis novel was a pitfall to Mrs. Browning. Long and numerous digressions continually interfere with the development of the plot. Even if the end were attainable hers was not the genius to attain it. Whether another might succeed in such an aim is not here the question. But of the two English poets who have come nearest, Scott and Mrs. Browning herself, the work of one tends more and more to forget the poetry in the novel, till it passes by a natural transition to prose fiction in "Waverley"; the other wrote a great poem which, although for some it may sustain interest on account of its story, no one would criticise as a story. Indeed, its treatment as a novel would hardly be necessary if it were not for the fact that Mrs. Browning challenged

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such criticism in avowing her aims. As fiction, then, it fails ; but as a poem, in spite of unevennesses and even occasional lapses from taste, its manifold beauties are such that it is difficult to give any conception of them by selections. Little realisation of the " living fire " that, as Swinburne says, carries the reader on with " the rush and glow and ardour of aspiring and palpitating life " can be thus given. For in its pages Mrs. Browning pours forth, with a fervour and sincerity sweeping all before them, her deepest philosophy, her highest artistic ideals, her tenderest woman's passions. It is the one great poem of its generation that, written by a woman, gave free and full expression to a woman's point of view as individual, mother, and wife ; it attacked passionately, and with daring for the time in which it was produced, the social conventions which press unevenly on men and women, and on the rich and the poor ; and it is of supreme value in giving, as has been pointed out, the spiritual autobiography of England's greatest woman poet. As such, it has been constantly drawn on in the course of the narrative ; some descriptive passages have also been quoted ; the picture of Marian Erle's child is a gem picked out from pages imbued with the very " fragrance of babyhood." Room must now be found for one eminently successful character study. It will serve also to illustrate the flashes of penetrating insight and pungent satire which lighten the work. It is that of Miss Leigh, the aunt whose chilly, formal

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reception of the little Aurora freezes her spontaneous affection into dull indifference.

I think I see my father's sister stand
Upon the hall-step of her country-house
To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm,
Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight
As if for taming accidental thoughts
From possible pulses ; brown hair pricked with grey
By frigid use of life (she was not old
Although my father's elder by a year),
A nose drawn sharply, yet in delicate lines ;
A close mild mouth, a little soured about
The ends, through speaking unrequited loves
Or peradventure niggardly half-truths ;
Eyes of no colour,—once they might have smiled,
But never, never have forgot themselves
In smiling ; cheeks, in which was yet a rose
Of perished summers, like a rose in a book,
Kept more for ruth than pleasure,—if past bloom,
Past fading also.

She had lived, we'll say,
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
A quiet life, which was not life at all
(But that, she had not lived enough to know),
Between the vicar and the country squires,
The lord-lieutenant looking down sometimes
From the empyrean to assure their souls
Against chance-vulgarisms, and, in the abyss
The apothecary, looked on once a year
To prove their soundness of humility.
The poor-club exercised her Christian gifts
Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats,
Because we are of one flesh after all
And need one flannel (with a proper sense

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Of difference in the quality)—and still
The book-club, guarded from your modern trick
Of shaking dangerous questions from the crease,
Preserved her intellectual. She had lived
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch
Was act and joy enough for any bird.

The remaining selections shall exemplify as far as possible the theories on which the poem is based. They found direct or indirect expression through all the writings of Mrs. Browning's poetic maturity.

The first gives the key to the inspiration of the work, and raises the controversial question as to the poet's proper field. Tennyson, it will be remembered, questioning whether it were wise to attempt to "remodel models" and bring back the past, since "Nature brings not back the Mastodon," solved his doubt by imbuing ancient themes with the modern spirit in the "Idylls." Mrs. Browning, occupied with the same problem, reached a different conclusion :

I do distrust the poet who discerns
No character or glory in his times,
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
To sing—oh, not of lizard or of toad
Alive i' the ditch there,—'twere excusable,
But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter
Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,
As dead as must be, for the greater part,
The poems made on their chivalric bones ;
And that's no wonder : death inherits death.

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Nay, if there's room for poets in this world
A little overgrown (I think there is),
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's,—this live, throbbing
age,

That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles.
To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce,
Cry out for togas and the picturesque,
Is fatal,—foolish too. King Arthur's self
Was commonplace to Lady Guenever ;
And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat
As Fleet Street to our poets.

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age :
That, when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
“ Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked !
This bosom seems to beat still, or at least
It sets ours beating : this is living art,
Which thus presents and thus records true life.”

But the artist must be prophet and seer. If
he deal with the present and the material,
it must be to interpret it in the light of the
eternal and the spiritual ; and so viewed
“ the whole temporal show ” is of “ eterne
significance.”

Natural things
And spiritual,—who separates those two
In art, in morals, or the social drift,

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Tears up the bond of nature and brings death,
Paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse,
Leads vulgar days, deals ignorantly with men,
Is wrong, in short, at all points. We divide
This apple of life, and cut it through the pips,—
The perfect round which fitted Venus' hand
Has perished as utterly as if we ate
Both halves. Without the spiritual, observe,
The natural's impossible,—no form,
No motion : without sensuous, spiritual
Is inappreciable,—no beauty or power :
And in this twofold sphere the twofold man
(For still the artist is intensely a man)
Holds firmly by the natural, to reach
The spiritual beyond it,—fixes still
The type with mortal vision, to pierce through,
With eyes immortal, to the antetype
Some call the ideal,—better called the real,
And certain to be called so presently
When things shall have their names.

* * * *

No lily-muffled hum of a summer-bee,
But finds some coupling with the spinning stars ;
No pebble at your foot, but proves a sphere ;
No chaffinch, but implies the cherubim ;
And (glancing on my own thin, veined wrist),
In such a little tremor of the blood
The whole strong clamour of a vehement soul
Doth utter itself distinct. Earth's crammed with
heaven,
And every common bush afire with God ;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more from the first similitude.

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The poet then is supremely the interpreter : and that he may fulfil his mission he must shrink from no experience that life may offer. " World's cruelty behoves thee know," she wrote in " A Vision of Poets " at the beginning of her career. " A Musical Instrument " at the close gives varied expression to the idea underlying the following passages. The poets must " learn in suffering what they teach in song."

While Art

Sets action on the top of suffering :
The artist's part is both to be and do,
Transfixing with a special, central power
The flat experience of the common man,
And turning outward, with a sudden wrench,
Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing
He feels the inmost,—never felt the less
Because he sings it. Does a torch less burn
For burning next reflectors of blue steel,
That *he* should be the colder for his place
'Twixt two incessant fires,—his personal life's
And that intense refraction which burns back
Perpetually against him from the round
Of crystal conscience he was born into
If artist-born ? O sorrowful great gift
Conferred on poets, of a twofold life,
When one life has been found enough for pain !
We, staggering 'neath our burden as mere men,
Being called to stand up straight as demi-gods,
Support the intolerable strain and stress
Of the universal, and send clearly up
With voices broken by the human sob,
Our poems to find rimes among the stars !

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And the price must be paid for their greater insight. They could not give voice to it if they did not realise keenly the sweeter joys of our common humanity, which it may be their lot to forgo.

O my God, my God,
O supreme Artist, who as sole return
For all the cosmic wonder of Thy work,
Demandest of us just a word . . . a name,
“ My Father ! ” Thou hast knowledge, only
Thou,

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still
On winter nights by solitary fires
And hear the nations praising them far off,
Too far ! aye, praising our quick sense of love,
Our very heart of passionate womanhood,
Which could not beat so in the verse without
Being present also in the unknissed lips
And eyes undried because there's none to ask
The reason they grew moist.

To sit alone
And think for comfort how, that very night,
Affianced lovers, leaning face to face
With sweet half-listenings for each other's breath,
Are reading haply from a page of ours,
To pause with a thrill (as if their cheeks had
touched)
When such a stanza, level to their mood,
Seems floating their own thought out—“ So I feel
For thee,”—“ And I, for thee : this poet knows
What everlasting love is ! ”

Finally, theories of life and art, the woman's and the poet's, meet and find consummation in the impassioned exaltation of the close :

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“ Art ’s a service,—mark :

A silver key is given to thy clasp,
And thou shalt stand unwearied, night and day,
And fix it in the hard, slow-turning wards,
To open, so, that intermediate door
Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form
And form insensuous, that inferior men
May learn to feel on still through these to those,
And bless thy ministration. The world waits
For help. Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.
Now press the clarion on thy woman’s lip
(Love’s holy kiss shall still keep consecrate)
And breathe thy fine keen breath along the brass,
And blow all class-walls level as Jericho’s
Past Jordan,—crying from the top of souls,
To souls, that, here assembled on earth’s flats,
They get them to some purer eminence
Than any hitherto beheld for clouds !
What height we know not,—but the way we know,
And how by mounting ever, we attain,
And so climb on. It is the hour for souls,
That bodies, leavened by the will and love,
Be lightened to redemption. The world’s old,
But the old world waits the time to be renewed,
Toward which, new hearts in individual growth
Must quicken, and increase to multitude
In new dynasties of the race of men ;
Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously
New churches, new economies, new laws
Admitting freedom, new societies
Excluding falsehood : He shall make all new.”

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My Romney !—Lifting up my hand in his,
As wheeled by seeing spirits toward the east,
He turned instinctively, where, faint and far,
Along the tingling desert of the sky,
Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,
Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass
The first foundations of that new, near Day
Which should be builded out of heaven to God.
He stood a moment with erected brows
In silence, as a creature might who gazed,—
Stood calm, and fed his blind, majestic eyes
Upon the thought of perfect noon : and when
I saw his soul saw,—“ Jasper first,” I said,
“ And second, sapphire ; third, chalcedony ;
The rest in order,—last, an amethyst.”¹

Without entering into any discussion of the views put forth, we may pause a moment to point out two distinctive features.

First, stress must be laid on the words which crystallise Mrs. Browning's whole theory of art : “ Art's a service.” This high and noble utilitarianism was more and more her inspiration. If, in the widest sense, there can be no other view, its peril lies in too narrow an interpretation, when art, sacrificed to service, loses half its power to serve. Mrs. Browning's impetuosity and keen human sympathy combined, particularly in her later work, to make this an especial danger.

Secondly, it is clear from the extracts that her idealistic philosophy of life and of art is essentially emotional. The poet's sphere is suffering that he may serve. Art and life alike

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are useless until touched by love to finer issues. No definite conclusion is reached, or even suggested, as to the social problems raised.

The same, however, may be said of the other great poem of the period which attacks similar difficulties—Tennyson's "Princess." And while artistically Tennyson's work may be far more perfect, it compares but ill for conviction, fire, and living force with that of the woman poet on the questions which deeply concern her.

IX

THE foregoing quotations have a personal interest, beyond that of the important problems touched upon. They show clearly that the devotion with which Mrs. Browning abandoned herself to the fighting of Italy's battles was simply the translation into action of her poetic creed. To live in and for the present was with her an article of faith. But even a less sympathetic nature must have been stirred to the depths by the events that were taking place in Italy, and for such as Mrs. Browning to stand aside was impossible. Here was a nation working out its destiny, a "live throbbing age" with history visibly in the making. Inevitably she threw herself heart and soul into the struggle that Italy was engaged in against Austrian tyranny. We must return to this to take up her story.

In the outburst of revolutionary enthusiasm

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that swept over Europe in 1848 it seemed for a moment that the hour of Italy's freedom had already come. The first part of the poem "Casa Guidi Windows" gives the record of Mrs. Browning's impressions and aspirations. But they were not yet to find fulfilment. Defeat was succeeded by the restoration of the Austrian *régime* with severer oppression, and the second part of the poem tells of despair. The whole is one of the least successful of Mrs. Browning's longer works. In spite of passages of great beauty, its spontaneous enthusiasm often lapses into bombast; its satire into violence; and it had no political significance.

Yet it is not without interest historically; for it is the outcome of a spirit that is wholly of nineteenth-century growth,—the passion for freedom which transcends the limitations of country, race, and creed in a common sympathy of human brotherhood.

Eight years passed before the Italians made any further attempt to throw off their subjection. In the interval Victor Emanuel and his brilliant minister, Cavour, matured their plans and watched and waited.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Browning brought "Aurora Leigh" to completion, and with its publication her greatest work was done. She produced no other long poem; very few that added anything to her reputation. One reason undoubtedly lies in the sacrifice of her Muse to the cause of Italian liberty. To this must be added the steady decrease in health which became

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apparent from the time of what proved her last visit to England in 1856. After a visit to France two years later she left Italy no more.

But, through bodily frailty, the eager and courageous spirit shone only in a flame of purer enthusiasm. Henceforth, her story becomes Italy's. In 1859 hopes, dashed to the ground ten years before, sprang up again when Napoleon III. entered the field on behalf of her beloved country. She was always an admirer of a man of power such as she believed him to be. Now she hailed him as hero and deliverer in "Napoleon III. in Italy."

. . . he might have had the world with him,
But chose to side with suffering men,
And had the world against him when
He came to deliver Italy.

Emperor
Evermore.

Her happiness at his early successes knew no bounds. She worked herself up into a fever of enthusiasm. England's hesitation, the doubts of those who distrusted the Emperor, alike aroused her anger and bitter scorn, which she poured out in several poems, impassioned if not inspired. She looked at Italy through the halo of her unselfish ardour, interpreting all the actions of the allies, down to those of the meanest soldier in the ranks, in the light of her own idealism. But a terrible disappointment was in store. The Emperor suddenly made peace at Villafranca, with the liberation of Italy

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unachieved. So keenly did the blow affect Mrs. Browning, after all her elation, that a severe illness resulted. Yet with the restoration of comparative health she recovered her faith in Napoleon. The recovery is interesting psychologically, for it illustrates the pertinacity with which she clung to a cause, or an illusion.

In the "Poems before Congress," published in 1860, Mrs. Browning collected her writings referring to the crisis. Their main virtue is their unquestionable sincerity; none are specially noteworthy. The feeling with which they are written is often, to say the least, overwrought; for the poet's health was failing and the nervous strain very great. Further, it is extremely doubtful if poetry and politics can ever mix, without detriment at any rate to the poetry. It may be that Mrs. Browning's genius was in any case becoming exhausted. Yet two among her last poems, "Little Mattie" and "The Musical Instrument," rank with her best, and seem to point to the conclusion that she made a very real sacrifice in giving up her talents to political warfare. But if from the critical point of view this is to be regretted, it must be remembered that the price was one Mrs. Browning herself would never have hesitated to pay. Seemingly unconscious of the inferiority of this collection of poems to much of her other work, she expected their politics to raise a storm. Yet the moral courage which prompted the courting of unpopularity by their publication was unflinching.

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She printed them to satisfy her own conscience, to relieve her own feelings ; persuaded that that alone is worth writing which springs from conviction ; that truth, beauty, and utility go hand in hand in the production of an artistic whole ; and that while the failure or the success of performance might be left to the critics to judge, the subject was one in its very essence suited to artistic treatment. If this conviction were mistaken, the verdict involved condemnation not only of her art as such, but of her life-work.

Out of the darkness which followed the Peace of Villafranca came deliverance. This is not the place to dwell on the thrilling story of the romantic march of Garibaldi and his "thousand." After their occupation of Naples, Cavour, ever ready, seized his opportunity, joined Garibaldi, and in 1861 Victor Emanuel was declared king of a united Italy. Cavour died at the moment of triumph. Mrs. Browning just lived to know the deed accomplished. Sorrow for Italy's sake over the great statesman's death possibly increased her susceptibility to the illness which hastened her end. She was seized with a bronchial attack, apparently little more severe than those to which she was continually subject. Browning felt anxious from the first, but told himself there was nothing to justify his fears. On the evening of June 28 they made plans for the summer holidays and next year's movements, and Penini was sent to bed reassured that she was

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much better. A night of broken sleep was followed in the early morning by symptoms which alarmed Browning so much that he sent for the doctor. His wife smiled at his fears. As he took her in his arms she gave him, as if moved by premonitions of parting, a last, perfect expression of her love for him. A few minutes later, her head against his cheek, she breathed her last.

She was buried in the English cemetery at Florence, where stands the sarcophagus designed by Sir Frederick Leighton, with the simple inscription, "E. B. B. ob. 1861." On the walls of Casa Guidi, Florence has placed a marble slab to the memory of the English poet who made Italy's cause her own :

Here wrote and died

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

In whose woman's heart were reconciled
The knowledge of the wise, and the inspiration of
the poet,

And who made of her verse a golden ring
Between Italy and England.

Grateful Florence
Has placed this stone.

1861.

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X

THE greatest of women poets " is a title that seems to spring inevitably to one's lips when mention is made of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Yet, though the praise is higher than when it was first accorded her—for Christina Rossetti and Jean Ingelow, to go no further, have written since then—it implies the evasion of a difficulty. Where is she to be placed among the poets of the century? In the preceding pages an attempt has been made to answer this question. It is not enough to settle her relation to other women poets; though in judging her writing we must perforce return to the fact that her genius was biassed by her sex. She was a woman before she was an artist. Her production was essentially subjective, giving expression frankly to a woman's emotions and a woman's point of view. This brings us back directly to the position that is hers in Victorian literature.

For her genius alone she ranks at least among the group of poets who stand next to the two greatest, Tennyson and Browning.

Her writings, indeed, are in one sense the feminine counterpart of Tennyson's. They reflect, like his, the tendencies of the contemporary school in literature, and with this, the changes of current thought on social, if not on scientific subjects, which were taking place in this era of transition. And they do so with the

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added interest of an independence which was itself largely due to the movements portrayed. Mrs. Browning expresses her emotions concerning them no longer in conventional guise : she writes because she feels strongly ; has something to say as a woman ; and believes it to be worth saying. Without her, one significant aspect of the many-sided movements of the century would lack its highest representation in the sphere of poetry.

And this leads up to another point. As Fanny Burney and Jane Austen found woman's field in fiction for the beginning of the century, so Mrs. Browning excelled in her province simply by being true to her own inner experience. Thus she takes her place among the earliest group of women writers whose work helped to bring about a great change in the conception of the heroine in literature. When women began to reveal themselves as they really were, and wrote themselves down as very ordinarily human in faults and virtues, in aspirations and emotions, the death-blow was struck at the colourless and uninteresting "pink-and-white" heroines of earlier fiction.

The gulf between those even of Dickens and of George Meredith marks the transformation, which other parallel movements also aided to effect.

In a short sketch such as this, treating of a prolific poet like Mrs. Browning, there is danger of throwing too much emphasis perhaps on her strong points, and of appearing to pass

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over too lightly the flaws and blemishes which recur in her writings. In her case especially, these cannot be permitted to remain unnoticed. She is essentially the poet of the emotions ; and she can play upon them with delicacy and tenderness. But unfortunately we must go further, and repeat that with the gift of spontaneity, she was denied that of artistic restraint ; with a daring independence, she was deficient in the sense of form ; she wrote easily, therefore she wrote too much ; her work is often marred by extravagance ; her sentiment becomes sentimentality ; her originality leads to want of taste. In fact, into every pitfall which her peculiar gifts laid open to her she plunged at times with headlong recklessness. Her impetuosity has risked, if it has not fatally forfeited, the position which her best work might deservedly claim for her. Yet this itself was the outcome of the earnestness that burned in her like a consuming fire ; and everywhere her defects are the reverse side of rare gifts. She was a genius, large-hearted and big-brained—but above all, large-hearted. She flung herself with absolute abandonment into whatever cause she took up, with a conviction of the vital importance of every smallest action.

“ It is a mathematical fact,” says Carlyle, “ that the casting of this pebble from my hand alters the centre of gravity of the Universe.” The same spirit breathes through the following sonnet, written shortly after Mrs. Browning’s marriage :

ELIZABETH BROWNING

LIFE

Each creature holds an insular point in space ;
Yet what man stirs a finger, breathes a sound,
But all the multitudinous beings round
In all the countless worlds, with time and place
For their conditions, down to the central base,
Thrill, haply, in vibration and rebound,
Life answering life across the vast profound,
In full antiphony, by a common grace ?
I think, this sudden joyaunce which illumes
A child's mouth sleeping, unaware may run
From some soul newly loosened from earth's
tombs.

I think, this passionate sigh, which half-begun
I stifle back, may reach and stir the plumes
Of God's calm angel standing in the sun.

Here is all the Puritanic fervour of a
Carlyle or a Kingsley, albeit lightened by a
woman's fancy. It is the fire of this earnest-
ness which permeates her work, which inspired
her life, and which burnt itself out in her
fragile body in the final struggle for Italian
freedom.

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Robert Browning
G. F. Watts

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

BY
ERNEST RHYS



**LONDON : GEORGE G.
HARRAP & COMPANY**

3 PORTSMOUTH STREET
KINGSWAY W.C. 4 MCMXIV

PRINTED AT
THE BALLANTYNE PRESS
LONDON ENGLAND

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All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of
good, shall exist ;

Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor
good, nor power

Whose voice has gone forth, but each sur-
vives for the melodist

When eternity affirms the conception of an
hour.

THERE in four lines we have the idea that undershot all Browning's verse. He was a tireless discoverer of the finer elements that lie hid in human nature and the music that is sent up to heaven from the places where men and women throng. He never forgot in his poetry the salient ideas of beauty and power and the implied melody that connect the flying moment with eternal thought ; and for him the music lost nothing by being heard in the crowd and amid the stir of cities. He was himself a son of the greatest of cities, born in London—Southampton Street, Camberwell—May 7, 1812. He bore the same name as his father and grandsire before him, both of whom were attached in some position to the Bank of England. This, although poetry and music have sometimes, we know, been written in banks and counting-houses, would not suggest to us at once that the poet's father had any

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feeling for poetry. The elder Browning, however, had a decided turn for verse-writing, and it is on record that in order to help his children to memorize facts and dates and Latin declensions, he used to put these into the form of a versified "memoria technica." The father, too, was able to read poetry aloud to his youngsters in a way to delight their ears, and thus gave the boy very early his sense of the value of sound and of the pronounced and uttered word. Robert was the eldest child in the family group, and it is related that when he was still so small that his hands could barely reach its top, he used to march round the table shouting out verses aloud and marking the metre with his hands. The poet was not less fortunate in his mother; she was naturally musical, and it was to her that he traced the inherent love of music that became a live factor in his history and in his own writings. His mother too was deeply religious, and gave to him that feeling for the spiritual realities which affects the whole philosophy of his verse. In other ways he depended upon her care and affection to a degree that made his first parting with her when he was sent away to school almost more than a small boy's courage was equal to. This first school was in London—not very far away from his own home; and during his school-days he learnt more from the home-books chosen by himself, which he fell upon in his spare hours, than from those in the ordinary school routine. His

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father had an old copy of Quarles's "Emblems," which, strange as it may appear, delighted the boy ; and through Quarles and Milton he passed on to Byron, and became quickly affected by the prevailing note. His earliest verse-writing (and he began to write poetry vigorously before he was twelve years old) was strongly tinged with Byronic colours. A scheme to publish a first book of poems before he was fairly in his teens came to nothing ; but he did not therefore desist from his ruling passion. The next stage in his journey carried him on from Byron to Shelley. The late William Sharp in his "Life of Browning" tells us that the boy happened to catch sight of a volume of Shelley on a bookstall which was marked as "very scarce" and described as "Mr. Shelley's Atheistical Poem." This led him to beg his mother to get him a copy of Shelley's poems—not so easy to come by in those days. However, they were at length procured, and for some years to come Shelley was the ruling star in his sky.

Meanwhile he had left his first school, and had begun to read at home under a private tutor. When the question came up from time to time of how he was to gain his livelihood, he never wavered in his determination to give his days somehow or other to literature ; and literature resolved itself in his case into one master-expression—Poetry. He attained very early to a conscious and deliberate sense of what his own scheme of life was to be ; and that settled, he showed a characteristic unconcern about

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the worldly economy of the adventure. "For my own future way," he once wrote to his wife, "I've always refused to care." Luckily for him, his father, who had himself been disappointed in the career which he would have liked to follow, did not, like some fathers, attempt to turn the boy from his purpose. He was hardly more than a boy indeed when his first poem, "Pauline," appeared in January 1833, a date almost simultaneous with that of Tennyson's book of "Poems," and a year of other literary events of some significance in the calendar. It is very interesting to us, as we now look back over the poet's whole achievement, to find that "Pauline," which is described as a "fragment of a confession," has a motto from Cornelius Agrippa, which suggests that the writing is in some sense dramatic. Afterwards, speaking of it retrospectively, he described it as his earliest attempt at "poetry always dramatic in principle." But who shall say that he does not often in it reveal himself?

And first I sang, as I in dream have seen,
Music wait on a lyrist for some thought,
Yet singing to herself until it came.
I turned to those old times and scenes, where all
That's beautiful had birth for me, and made
Rude verses on them all ; and then I paused—
I had done nothing, so I sought to know
What mind had yet achieved. No fear was mine
As I gazed on the works of mighty bards,
In the first joy at finding my own thoughts
Recorded, and my powers exemplified,

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And feeling their aspirings were my own.
And then I first explored passion and mind ;
And I began afresh ; I rather sought
To rival what I wondered at, than form
Creations of my own ; so much was light
Lent back by others, yet much was my own.

He was still under Shelley's influence when he wrote " Pauline " ; and it is worth remark that in the poem there is a distinct tendency to make much of Nature, as entering into the life of the characters it portrays, and this is done with something of a Shelleyan fantasy. In fact, it would have been hard to foretell from the writing of this poem whether its author was more likely to become, like his master and forerunner, a poet of nature or to become, more definitely and more dramatically, an interpreter of men and women. " Pauline " made no great effect on the public when it first appeared, although there were one or two critics who distinguished the real or potential faculty of its author. The elder Mill shrewdly remarked on the self-consciousness it showed ; and no doubt many glimpses of Browning's early experience occur in its pages. After its appearance Browning went to Russia and spent three months in St. Petersburg. A few scattered lyrics are all that we have to fill up the gap that succeeded before the appearance of his next long poem, " Paracelsus," which was to be a determining event in his career. But the new poem was not readily to find its audience. As so often happens, popular attention was

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turned to known names and to recognized reputations, and for the moment Talfourd's "Ion" was the one poetic book of the season and of the fashion to which the irresponsible reviewers gave their pens. One or two critics were prescient enough, however, to divine the imaginative life of the poem; and especially John Forster, at that time an unknown name to Browning. He spoke of the brilliant promise of these pages; and his tribute was the beginning of a long friendship. Still more important is the fact, which Browning learnt long afterwards, that a copy of the newly published poem reached the invalid's chamber of another young poet, to wit, Elizabeth Barrett, who was afterwards to become his wife. It was indeed a book rich in the promise of an imagination that was breaking a way for itself into the circle of reality.

The voice too has become stronger, the accent more significant, than those we heard in "Pauline." The character of Paracelsus—the overweening would-be master of all knowledge, the transcendentalist who longs to attain the impossible, the man who would be superman—was one to quicken Browning's thought to a point of eloquence. We find it in this noble passage (one which General Gordon confessed was his favourite in all Browning's verse):

I go to prove my soul !

I see my way as birds their trackless way—

I shall arrive ! what time, what circuit first,

I ask not : but unless God send his hail

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Or blinding fire-balls, sleet, or stifling snow,
In some time—his good time—I shall arrive :
He guides me and the bird. In his good time !

We find it expressed in the self-revelation of Paracelsus, where he talks with his two friends Festus and Michal in the garden at Wurzburg, and speaks of his quest of the Ideal and the transcendent sacred wisdom,

Take—for a revelation of the overmastering and intimate desire for knowledge in Paracelsus and the splendid casuistry with which he explained to Festus and to himself his great ambition—a page from the Wurzburg garden scene, in the canto called “ Paracelsus Aspires ” :

Par. (After a pause.) No, I have nought to fear !
Who will may know

The secret'st workings of my soul. What though
It be so ?—if indeed the strong desire
Eclipse the aim in me ?—if splendour break
Upon the outset of my path alone,
And duskest shade succeed ? What fairer seal
Shall I require to my authentic mission
Than this fierce energy—this instinct striving
Because its nature is to strive ?—enticed
By the security of no broad course,
With no success forever in its eyes !
How know I else such glorious fate my own,
But in the restless irresistible force
That works within me ? Is it for human will
To institute such impulses ?—still less,
To disregard their promptings ? What should I
Do, kept among you all ; your loves, your cares,
Your life—all to be mine ? Be sure that God
Ne'er dooms to waste the strength he deigns impart !

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Ask the gier-eagle why she stoops at once
Into the vast and unexplored abyss,
What full-grown power informs her from the first,
Why she not marvels, strenuously beating
The silent boundless regions of the sky !
Be sure they sleep not whom God needs ! Nor fear
Their holding light his charge, when every hour
That finds that charge delayed, is a new death.
This for the faith in which I trust ; and hence
I can abjure so well the idle arts
These pedants strive to learn and teach ; Black Arts,
Great Works, the Secret and Sublime, forsooth—
Let others prize : too intimate a tie
Connects me with our God !

That is from the opening part. Turn on
towards the tragedy of the close and pause at
the sea-song that Paracelsus sings, with defeat
at his back and death fully accepted before him—
a poem that may be compared with Tennyson's
“ Lotos Eaters ” :

Over the sea our galleys went,
With cleaving prows in order brave,
To a speeding wind and a bounding wave—
A gallant armament :
Each bark built out of a forest-tree,
Left leafy and rough as first it grew,
And nailed all over the gaping sides,
Within and without, with black-bull hides,
Seethed in fat and suppled in flame,
To bear the playful billows' game ;
So each good ship was rude to see,
Rude and bare to the outward view,
But each upbore a stately tent ;
Where cedar-pales in scented row
Kept out the flakes of the dancing brine :

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And an awning drooped the mast below,
In fold on fold of the purple fine,
That neither noon-tide, nor star-shine,
Nor moonlight cold which maketh mad,

Might pierce the regal tenement.

When the sun dawned, oh, gay and glad
We set the sail and plied the oar ;
But when the night-wind blew like breath,
For joy of one day's voyage more,
We sang together on the wide sea,
Like men at peace on a peaceful shore ;
Each sail was loosed to the wind so free,
Each helm made sure by the twilight star,
And in a sleep as calm as death,
We, the strangers from afar,

Lay stretched along, each weary crew
In a circle round its wondrous tent,
Whence gleamed soft light and curled rich scent,
And with light and perfume, music too :
So the stars wheeled round, and the darkness past,
And at morn we started beside the mast,
And still each ship was sailing fast ! . . .

If the close is tragic, it is the tragedy of the
growth, not the destruction of thought. " If
I stoop," says Paracelsus,

Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time ; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast—its splendour, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom : I shall emerge one day !
You understand me ? I have said enough ?

Fest. Now die, dear Aureole !

Par. Festus, let my hand—

This hand, lie in your own—my own true friend !
Aprile ! Hand in hand with you, Aprile !

Fest. And this was Paracelsus !

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We have seen that the dramatic idea was not wanting in "Paracelsus," which might indeed be called the tragedy of knowledge, summed up in that phrase of its hero, "I am he that aspired to know." Following that poem, Browning was destined now to think seriously of writing for the stage; and his acquaintance with Macready the actor, beginning in 1835, encouraged him. Once, after having seen Macready play Othello, he said: "I have been bitten. I mean to write a tragedy on Narses." Presently we shall see how these first ideas grew to definite form. But in the artistic sequence of his work it is an advantage to move from "Paracelsus" to "Sordello" before going on to the main groups of the dramatic and sub-dramatic writings which he collected in "Bells and Pomegranates."

II

THE test, it has been said, of a reader's idolatry, or his perfect understanding of Browning, lies in the pages of "Sordello." It was a sore point with the author almost to the end that its poetic effect was not found, as he meant it to be, reasonably clear. We may think that the poem was written before its time, and needed that the audience should have been taught what may be called the Browning dialect, before sitting down to listen to its thrice-compacted verse. But we may account for its idiomatic difficulty

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in many ways : first, by the fashion Browning adopted of breaking the line-rhythms. He did this through his use of colloquial idioms and by a very original and expressive mode of leaving out particles, or suggesting a change or a development of the idea under consideration by a gap and a sudden dropping of the thread.

When we remember what the rhymed couplet was in other hands, with its strong monotonous beat and decided end-stopped lines, and how it was used by a poet like Dryden, we see at once something of the unaccustomedness there was in "Sordello" for its first readers.

Dryden began one of his famous paraphrases with a couplet rather like the opening couplet of the fourth book of "Sordello" :

Of all the cities in Roumanian lands
The chief and most renowned Ravenna stands.

Browning's lines run :

Meantime Ferrara lay in rueful case ;
The lady-city, for whose sole embrace
Her pair of suitors struggled. . . .

This is, however, one of the plain-sailing passages which do not give us the characteristic movement of the poem. In other pages, as in those of the second book, we find Browning using so concentrated and contorted a method that any one save the adept is liable to be pulled up by the verse as he reads. Take the delightful episode of the jongleurs, in a page which

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seems to imply a lyrical clearness of colour, and note how rich, but how difficult, is the description of Sordello's lay :

On flew the song, a giddy race,
After the flying story ; word made leap
Out word ; rhyme—rhyme ; the lay could barely
keep

Pace with the action visibly rushing past :
Both ended. Back fell Naddo more aghast
Than your Egyptian from the harassed bull
That wheels abrupt and, bellowing, fronts ful
His plague, who spies a scarab 'neath his tongue,
And finds 'twas Apis' flank his hasty prong
Insulted. But the people—but the cries,
And crowding round, and proffering the prize !
(For he had gained some prize)—He seemed to
shrink

Into a sleepy cloud, just at whose brink
One sight withheld him ; there sat Adelaide,
Silent ; but at her knees the very maid
Of the North Chamber, her red lips as rich,
The same pure fleecy hair ; one curl of which,
Golden and great, quite touched his cheek as o'er
She leant, speaking some six words and no more ;
He answered something, anything ; and she
Unbound a scarf and laid it heavily
Upon him, her neck's warmth and all ; again
Moved the arrested magic ; in his brain
Noises grew, and a light that turned to glare,
And greater glare, until the intense flare
Engulfed him, shut the whole scene from his sense,
And when he woke 'twas many a furlong thence,
At home : the sun shining his ruddy wont ;
The customary birds'-chirp ; but his front
Was crowned—was crowned !

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This is by no means one of the hardest pages ; yet the reader who comes to it fresh from the terse narrative-verse of Dryden will be apt to find the Naddo lines break and delay the narrative current. It may be said that to present such an excerpt sans context is not quite fair ; but in " Sordello " the verse does not grow easier to the sense as it progresses. The continual effort to dig out of the page the full imaginative significance, and the dramatic innuendo with which the poem abounds, does undoubtedly grow too tiring to let the reader derive his expected amount of pleasure. Still, there are different kinds of pleasure, and those who will agree to take " Sordello " on Browning's own terms and share what may be termed the " poetic pains " (to transpose Wordsworth's phrase) will find they are well repaid for their trouble.

Like " Pauline," " Sordello " is a study of the history of a soul ; but a whole world of new experience had passed over the poet since he wrote the earlier poem, and into these pages are crowded all the fast, hurrying ideas and the gathered impressions which his first acquaintance with Italy taught him. Knowing in himself how much of close imagining and of true picturing of the scenes through which his characters passed was to be found in its vivid verse, he was mortified to find that so few could appreciate it. It is related that he read thirty books on Italian history before and during the writing of it ; and yet he himself declared that

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its historical circumstance was only to be regarded as background, and that his real care had been to make every incident contribute to the grand motive—that is, the development of a soul: as we read, that development is in fact the progress of a man from egotism to altruism, from self to non-self and human sympathy.

In following the story we are made aware of Browning's profound belief that poetry is the destined vehicle for all eternal truths: the true poet is the seer intended by Heaven to be their exponent.

Little more need be said by way of comment; it will be enough to quote from one page in which the author's purpose shines clear through the difficult medium. It pictures Sordello as the self-absorbed boy:

. . . Suppose Sordello hence
Selfish enough, without a moral sense
However feeble; what informed the boy
Others desired a portion in his joy?
Or say a ruthless chance broke woof and warp—
A heron's nest beat down by March winds sharp,
A fawn breathless beneath the precipice,
A bird with unsoiled breast and filmless eyes
Warm in the brake—could these undo the trance
Lapping Sordello? Not a circumstance
That makes for you, friend Naddo! Eat fern-seed
And peer beside us and report indeed
If (your word) Genius dawned with throes and stings
And the whole fiery catalogue, while springs,
Summers and winters quietly came and went,
Putting at length that period to content

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By right the world should have imposed : bereft
Of its good offices, Sordello, left
To study his companions, managed rip
Their fringe off, learn the true relationship,
Core with its crust, their natures with his own ;
Amid his wild-wood sights he lived alone :
As if the poppy felt with him ! . . .

With the poppy we must break off ; but the treatment of it is worth a special note of explanation. Browning had a profound regard for flowers, and often used them to express symbolically the traits and natures of their human fellow-creatures. So here the poppy characterizes the life of Sordello, just as in "Garden Fancies" the Spanish flower there is used as the key to the lover's reading of his mistress's heart :

This flower she stopped at, finger on lip,
Stooped over, in doubt as settling its claim ;
Till she gave me, with pride to make no slip,
Its soft meandering Spanish name.
What a name ! was it love, or praise ?
Speech half asleep, or song half awake ?
I must learn Spanish, one of these days,
Only for that slow sweet name's sake.

III

AFTER "Sordello" we enter upon a new region of Browning's work in "Pippa Passes." It forms number one of the series of "Bells and Pomegranates," in whose six numbers the poet touched almost every note, dramatic, lyric, and dramatic-lyrical

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in turn. The poem tells with charming colour and melody how the child-heroine Pippa spent a single holiday, New Year's Day, which was the one day she had to herself in the whole year. By a natural turn of girlish fantasy, she decides to imagine that she is, one after the other, four different characters, and they, if you please, are to be the four who are the happiest folk in Asolo. In order to do this she passes the day in roaming about the town. At one hour she is up on the hill-side where Ottima and Sebald have met ; at midday she reaches the house of Jules above Orcana ; the evening finds her at the turret where Luigi and his mother live ; and at night she is at the Bishop's palace by the Duomo. But as it happens, in Browning's story Pippa's happiest souls have all come to moments of tragic possibility to themselves, and this moment in one case throws a shadow over her own destiny. So you have the figure of Pippa passing with her song on her lips, as thistledown might be blown across the window of a death-chamber, just when the doom of these people seems moving on to its end. In the first episode, that of Ottima and Sebald, the shadow of death has already been darkly cast, for old Luca Gaddi, her husband, lies murdered. Sebald is remorseful and conscience-stricken, and his German mind is full of its heavy torture. But Ottima neither cares nor feels for the dead man. Pippa's song heard by the guilty lovers is perfect in melody—the most perfect thing of its kind that Browning ever achieved.

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The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn ;
Morning's at seven ;
The hill-side's dew-pearled :
The lark's on the wing ;
The snail's on the thorn ;
God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world !

To this passage we ought to add the opening invocation to Day with which Pippa greets the morning as she springs out of bed :

Day !

Faster and more fast,
O'er night's brim, day boils at last ;
Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim
Where spurting and supprest it lay—
For not a froth-flake touched the rim
Of yonder gap in the solid grey
Of the eastern cloud, an hour away ;
But forth one wavelet, then another, curled,
Till the whole sunrise, not to be supprest,
Rose, reddened, and its seething breast
Flickered in bounds, grew gold, then overflowed the
world.

Oh, Day, if I squander a wavelet of thee,
A mite of my twelve hours' treasure,
The least of thy gazes or glances,
(Be they grants thou art bound to, or gifts above
measure)
One of thy choices, or one of thy chances,
(Be they tasks God imposed thee, or freaks at thy
pleasure)
—My Day, if I squander such labour or leisure,
Then shame fall on Asolo, mischief on me !

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And from the close let us take Pippa's last song :

Over-head the tree-tops meet—
Flowers and grass spring 'neath one's feet—
There was nought above me, and nought below,
My childhood had not learned to know !
For, what are the voices of birds
—Ay, and of beasts,—but words—our words,
Only so much more sweet ?
The knowledge of that with my life begun !
But I had so near made out the sun,
And counted your stars, the Seven and One,
Like the fingers of my hand :
Nay, I could all but understand
Wherefore through heaven the white moon ranges ;
And just when out of her soft fifty changes
No unfamiliar face might overlook me—
Suddenly God took me !

That is sung as evil fate moves very near to
the singer herself, but she escapes the actual
stroke and her day ends as she goes back to bed
murmuring the words :

All service is the same with God—
With God, whose puppets, best and worst,
Are we : there is no last nor first.

When following Pippa's story, we were made
aware at every turn that Browning had within
his command almost every resource of dramatic
suggestion and that lyric contrast which can
intensify the action of drama, needed to make
him into a tragic playwright whose work would
equal that of the Elizabethans ; in fact, he had
already at this period turned his thoughts

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deliberately to the writing of plays actually intended for the stage. In the late autumn of 1835 he had been invited by his friend and mentor, W. J. Fox, to meet Macready the actor, who was then busily looking for a new play wherewith to redeem his fortunes. This acquaintanceship was to prove potential in Browning's history. He sent Macready a copy of his "Paracelsus," and at a later meeting in the following year, on the "first night" of Talfourd's "Ion," the great actor definitely asked the new poet to write him a play.

A supper party at Talfourd's followed the play, at which Wordsworth and Landor were present with Forster, Miss Mitford, and other memorable folk, and, rather to the astonishment of the guests, "Mr. Robert Browning, the youngest of our poets," was called upon to reply to the toast of English Poetry. It was afterwards, as they went downstairs together, that Macready kept Browning back and suggested that he should write him an original drama which would save him from going to America. "Strafford" was the result, and "Strafford," although a robust, well-designed piece of work, does not show us Browning in his most characteristic creative vein. However, Macready was impressed. In his diary he speaks of looking over two impossible plays, and then says as with a sigh of relief, "Read some scenes of 'Strafford,' which restore one to the world of sense and feeling once again." Later he became a little uneasy about its

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chances, and when the "first night" arrived it was only his acting that saved it. Some members of the company were evidently not of a kind to deal intelligently with their parts, and the author was much annoyed by the ignorance they showed at the rehearsal. "Think," said Miss Flower, "of his having to write out the meaning of the word 'impeachment,' as some of them thought it meant 'poaching.'"

On the third night the performance created some enthusiasm, but two nights later Vandanhoff, who took the part of Pym, ran away, and there its brief run ended. Even so, this first exploit of Browning's cannot be held as altogether unencouraging. The play-book when published brought no profit to the author; and we may pause here to note that at this time he was about to enter on a long period of comparative neglect, which swallowed up nearly twenty years of his life and reacted to some extent on his feeling about his own work. The attempt to circulate "Bells and Pomegranates" in parts came partly of his natural desire to reach the public and partly from an accidental suggestion of the printer Moxon, who had been producing some older authors in a similar form. "Pippa" first led the way at sixpence, but it did not sell. When the price was raised to a shilling it did better, and finally the parts were sold at two shillings and sixpence. He wrote this about the original issue:

Because a Pit-full of good natured people applauded
an early play of mine, I now begin the first of a series

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of Dramatical Pieces, to come out at intervals, and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which they appear will for once help me to a sort of Pit-audience again.

And here is his explanation of his title :

I only meant by the phrase Bells and Pomegranates to indicate an endeavour towards something like an alternation or mixture of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought. . . .

The second part contained " King Victor and King Charles." From " Strafford " we might quote one of Pym's orations, as he is one of the big antagonists of the play :

Pym.

A glorious thing—

We all say, friends, it is a glorious thing
To right that England ! Heaven grows dark above,—
Let's snatch one moment ere the thunder fall
To say how well the English spirit comes out
Beneath it ! all have done their best, indeed,
From lion Eliot, that grand Englishman,
To the least here : and who, the least one here,
When She is saved (and her redemption dawns
Dimly, most dimly, but it dawns—it dawns)—
Who'd give at any price his hope away
Of being named along with the Great Men ?
One would not . . . no, one would not give that up !

Hamph. And one name shall be dearer than all
names :

When children, yet unborn, are taught that name
After their fathers',—taught one matchless man . . .

Pym. . . . Saved England ?

What if Wentworth's should be still

That name ?

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And there is a Charles and Strafford quarrel
that may be compared with other stage-created
quarrels :

Cha. Too shameful, Strafford ! You advised the
war,

And . . .

Straf. I ! I ! that was never spoken with
Till it was entered on ! That loathe the war !
That say it is the maddest, wickedest . . .
Do you know, Charles, I think, within my heart,
That you would say I did advise the war ;
And if, thro' your own weakness, falsehood, Charles,
These Scots, with God to help them, drive me back . . .
You will not step between the raging People
And me, to say . . .

I knew you ! from the first
I knew you ! Never was so cold a heart !
Remember that I said it—that I never
Believed you for a moment !

—And, you loved me ?
You thought your perfidy profoundly hid
Because I could not share your whisperings
With Vane ? With Savile ? But your hideous heart—
I had your heart to see, Charles ! Oh, to have
A heart of stone—of smooth, cold, frightful stone !
Ay, call them ! Shall I call for you ? The Scots
Goaded to madness ? Or the English—Pym—
Shall I call Pym, your subject ?

“ A Blot in the Scutcheon ” was another
play of the same series, and in it we trace
the romantic element, as Browning conceived
romance, working under the clearest dramatic
law. The story is one indeed that is suffused

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with the tragic atmosphere. Fate and circumstance, love and desire warring against fate, youth and life against death—these elements are wrought to fine issues in the tragedy. Moreover they are wrought on lines that are dramatically and boldly drawn, so as to be effective when the scenes are presented ; and the play has in fact proved the most practicable and actable on the stage of all Browning's dramatic works. It was first played at Drury Lane by Miss Helen Faucit (afterwards Lady Theodore Martin) and Phelps in 1843 ; was revived at Sadlers' Wells five years later ; and played again both at Boston, U.S.A., and at London in 1885. The character of the hapless and beautiful Mildred—"calm yet kind . . . grave yet joyous . . . reserved yet free as light"—is drawn by sure, tender, subtle strokes that make it live in the gallery of ill-fated heroines. "I know nothing that is so affecting," wrote Dickens, "nothing in any book I have ever read, as Mildred's recurrence to that 'I was so young—I had no mother.' " The hero, Mertoun, is but a lay-figure of romance compared with her ; but he sings a serenade in which he atones lyrically, with a haunting break of melody, for some want of vitality in his dramatic character and his spirit as a true lover. Morold and Gwendolen are two excellent portraits, drawn somewhat in an Elizabethan manner. The serenade referred to sings itself, and cannot be omitted from the gallery of illustrations :

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There's a woman like a dew-drop, she's so purer than
the purest ;
And her noble heart's the noblest, yes, and her sure
faith's the surest :
And her eyes are dark and humid, like the depth on
depth of lustre
Hid i' the harebell, while her tresses, sunnier than
the wild-grape cluster,
Gush in golden-tinted plenty down her neck's rose-
misted marble :
Then her voice's music . . . call it the well's bub-
bling, the bird's warble !

And this woman says, " My days were sunless and my
nights were moonless,
Parched the pleasant April herbage, and the lark's
heart's outbreak tuneless,
If you loved me not ! " And I who—(ah, for words
of flame !) adore her !
Who am mad to lay my spirit prostrate palpably before
her—
I may enter at her portal soon, as now her lattice
takes me,
And by noontide as by midnight make her mine, as
hers she makes me !

The next play, " Colombe's Birthday," was
No. VI of the " Bells and Pomegranates " series.
It shows a marked change of treatment, in
that the drama is, so to speak, subjectively
directed upon the minds and spirits, the moods
and emotions, of the characters, rather than
upon outer events and actual deeds. To that
degree the work marks an era in the English
Victorian drama, and anticipates some of the

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later developments we have seen. The story of the birthday reminds one a little, by its use of a climacteric day as pivot, of "Pippa Passes"; and it turns upon the claim then made by a rival and true heir to Colombe's place in the Duchy—Prince Berthold. The development of her finer nature by rapid intuition, and by the effect on her of Berthold, and of Valence, her true lover, who is a poor advocate of Cleves, is in its new dramatic way unique. The one drawback to the play is that the characters tend to drop into the Browning dialect, and the very vividness of the idiom grows monotonous at times. But from the point where Colombe first takes off her coronet, making it the symbol of her fate, in Act II, to the end, the action, it must be admitted, moves by sure effects to its climax; and the "love-duet" (as it has been called) at the close of Act IV is wrought upon a large and unmistakably dramatic scale. In the "duet" Colombe gives Valence at last his decisive opportunity, which, indeed, he seizes with the instinct of noble desire . . . and the spirit of a man who can give himself up to a great cause:

The D. . . You are—so to speak—my subject yet?

Val. As ever—to the death!

The D. Obey me, then!

Val. I must!

The D. Approach her, and . . . No! First of all
Get more assurance; "my instructress," say,
"Was great, descended from a line of kings,
And even fair"—(wait why I say this folly)—
"She said, of all men, none for eloquence,

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Courage, and (what cast even these to shade)
The heart they sprung from,—none deserved like him
Who saved her at her need—if she said this,
What should not one I love, say ? ”

Val. Heaven—this hope—
Oh, lady, you are filling me with fire !

The D. Say this !—nor think I bid you cast aside
One touch of all that awe and reverence !
Nay—make her proud for once to heart’s content
That all this wealth of heart and soul’s her own !
Think you are all of this,—and, thinking it,
. . . (Obey !)

Val. I cannot choose !

The D. Then, kneel to her !
[*Valence sinks on his knee.*]

I dream !

Val. Have mercy ! Yours, unto the death,—
I have obeyed. Despise, and let me die.

The D. Alas, sir, is it to be ever thus ?
Even with you as with the world ? I know
This morning’s service was no vulgar deed
Whose motive, once it dares avow itself,
Explains all done and infinitely more,
So takes the shelter of a nobler cause.
Your service named its true source,—loyalty !
The rest’s unsaid again. The Duchess bids you,
Rise, sir ! The Prince’s words were in debate.

Val. [*rising.*] Rise ! Truth, as ever, Lady, comes
from you !

I should rise—I that spoke for Cleves, can speak
For Man—yet tremble now, that stood firm then !
I laughed—for ’twas past tears—that Cleves should
starve

With all hearts beating loud the infamy,
And no tongue daring trust as much to air !
Yet here, where all hearts speak, shall I be mute ?

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Oh lady, for your own sake look on me !
On all I am, and have, and do—heart, brain,
Body and soul,—this Valence and his gifts !
I was proud once—I saw you—and they sank,
So that each magnified a thousand times
Were nothing to you—but such nothingness
Would a crown gild it, or a sceptre prop,
A treasure speed, a laurel-wreath enhance ?
What is my own desert ? But should your love
Have . . . there's no language helps here . . .
 singled me,—
Then—Oh, that wild word “ then ! ”—be just to love,
In generosity its attribute !
Love, since you pleased to love ! All's cleared—a
 stage
For trial of the question kept so long
For you—Is Love or Vanity the best ?
You, solve it for the world's sake—you, speak first
What all will shout one day—you, vindicate
Our earth and be its angel ! All is said.
Lady, I offer nothing—I am yours,
But for the cause' sake, look on me and him
And speak !

The D. I have received the Prince's message :
Say, I prepare my answer !

Val. Take me, Cleves !

[*He withdraws.*]

The D. Mournful—that nothing's what it calls
 itself !

Devotion, zeal, faith, loyalty—mere love !
And, love in question, what may Berthold's be ?
I did ill to mistrust the world so soon—
Already was this Berthold at my side !
The valley-level has its hawks, no doubt :
May not the rock-top have its eagles, too ?
Yet Valence . . . let me see his Rival then !

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The love of a man for a great city, and the reaction of the soul of a city on the soul of a great man, offered a theme that went home to Browning's sympathies. Already we have seen how the spirit of place affected him, in some of the ballads and lyrics of the middle period. He took up in his play of "Luria" the story of Florence at a dramatic moment, but wrought it with a subtlety of motive too curiously considered for the ordinary working purpose of the stage. Luria is a noble Moor, of nature fine as Othello's but with a more developed, less simple mind. His devotion to Florence is allied with his sense of all the wealth of ideas and associations, beyond the Moorish and Oriental habit of thought, she has brought him. As he said to Tiburzio :

Sir, I am nearer Florence than her sons.

He saves her, in the hour of need, leading her men to victory against the Pisans. How does she reward him?—by accusing him as a traitor, and trying him while he is away risking his life for her. It is a cruelty his Arab soul cannot understand. So he decides not to revengē himself on her, as he has the opportunity of doing. His revenge is to die. What good indeed to live, when the one soul he most cared for, the soul of Florence, has proved faithless to him and has misunderstood him? This is heroism in its subtlety. And Browning in his treatment of the tragic close of the fourth act has again fallen back upon his favourite device of the self-confessing monologue, and given Luria a speech

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before his death which no actor could make quite acceptable to a mixed audience—which the author, in fact, did not intend should be put to such a test. But the image of the sun sinking over Florence is an affecting one :

There—

There, my own orb ! He sinks from out the sky !
Why, there ! a whole day has he blessed the land,
My land, our Florence all about the hills,
The fields and gardens, vineyards, olive-grounds,
All have been blest—and yet we Florentines
With minds intent upon our battle here,
Found that he rose too soon, or else too late,
Gave us no vantage, or gave Pisa more—
And so we wronged him ! Does he turn in ire
To burn the earth, that cannot understand ?
Or drop out quietly, and leave the sky,
His task once ended ? Night wipes blame away :
Another morning from my East shall rise
And find all eyes at leisure, more disposed
To watch it and approve its work, no doubt.
So, praise the new sun, the successor praise !
Praise the new Luria, and forget the old !

[Taking a phial from his breast.]

—Strange ! This is all I brought from my own Land
To help me—Europe would supply the rest,
All needs beside, all other helps save this !
I thought of adverse fortune, battles lost,
The natural upbraidings of the loser,
And then this quiet remedy to seek
At end of the disastrous day—

[He drinks.]

'Tis sought !

This was my happy triumph-morning : Florence
Is saved : I drink this, and ere night,—die !—Strange !

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IV

THE eight numbers of "Bells and Pomegranates" were, as we have seen, chiefly given to Browning's dramas. But they contained also two sets of his favourite form of poem in which the dramatic and the lyric elements are commingled, which formed No. 3 and No. 7 respectively of the series.

The first of these "Dramatic Lyrics" opens with some Cavalier Tunes which are vigorous enough to please any public. They read like lyric fragments struck off during the writing of "Strafford," and they make a gallant use of refrain. In the opening tune Pym reappears :

God for King Charles ! Pym and such carles
To the Devil that prompts 'em their treasonous parles !
Cavaliers, up ! Lips from the cup,
Hands from the pasty, nor bite take nor sup
Till you're (*Chorus*) *marching along, fifty-score strong,*
Great-hearted gentlemen, singing this song.

The third, "Boot and Saddle," has very much the movement of the now famous ballad of the ride from Ghent to Aix :

I

Boot, saddle, to horse, and away !
Rescue my Castle, before the hot day
Brightens to blue from its silvery grey,
(Cho.) Boot, saddle, to horse, and away !

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II

Ride past the suburbs, asleep as you'd say ;
Many's the friend there, will listen and pray
" God's luck to gallants that strike up the lay,
(*Cho.*) *Boot, saddle, to horse, and away !*"

III

Forty miles off, like a roebuck at bay,
Flouts Castle Brancepeth the Roundheads' array :
Who laughs, " Good fellows ere this, by my fay,
(*Cho.*) *Boot, saddle, to horse, and away ?*"

IV

Who ? My wife Gertrude ; that, honest and gay,
Laughs when you talk of surrendering, " Nay !
I've better counsellors ; what counsel they ?
(*Cho.*) *Boot, saddle, to horse, and away !*"

It has been pointed out that the real beginning of the form which Browning made almost his own, the dramatic monologue, is to be found in two comparatively early poems, " Johannes Agricola " and " Porphyria's Lover," to which he had originally given the rather gruesome title of " Madhouse Cells " when they were first printed in 1836. In the second of them Browning uses a ballad rhythm with a curiously intensive effect, and he shows in it a power of rendering the effect of place—what may be called the place interest—which was nearly related to his art of making the surroundings of his characters take the colour of their human and their spiritual experiences. The opening

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is written with a power of dramatic suggestion, culminating in the simplicity of the fifth line and the suspense of waiting for Porphyria :

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake,
I listened with heart fit to break ;
When glided in Porphyria : straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm ;
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sate down by my side
And called me.

The galloping ballad " How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix " is too familiar to need any new appreciation. It shows again how a psychologist and an artist in moods like Browning could render the movement and the valorous spirit of life when he liked.

"HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD NEWS FROM GHENT TO AIX "

[16—]

I

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he ;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three ;
" Good speed ! " cried the watch, as the gate-bolts
undrew ;

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"Speed !" echoed the wall to us galloping through ;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

II

Not a word to each other ; we kept the great pace
Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our
place ;

I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right,
Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,
Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.

III

'Twas moonset at starting ; but while we drew near
Lokern, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear ;
At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see ;
At Düffeld, 'twas morning as plain as could be ;
And from Mecheln church-steeple we heard the half-
chime,
So Joris broke silence with, " Yet there is time ! "

IV

At Aerschot, up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare thro' the mist at us galloping past,
And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last,
With resolute shoulders, each butting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray.

V

And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent
back
For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track ;

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And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that glance
O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance !
And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and
anon
His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.

VI

By Hasselt, Dirck groaned ; and cried Joris, " Stay
spur !
Your Roos galloped bravely, the fault's not in her,
We'll remember at Aix "—for one heard the quick
wheeze
Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering
knees,
And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

VII

So we were left galloping, Joris and I,
Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky ;
The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,
'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like
chaff ;
Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,
And " Gallop," gasped Joris, " for Aix is in sight ! "

VIII

" How they'll greet us ! "—and all in a moment his
roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone ;
And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
Of the news which alone could save Aix from her
fate,
With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim.

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IX

Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without
peer ;
Clapped my hands, laughed and sang, any noise, bad
or good,
Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood.

X

And all I remember is, friends flocking round
As I sate with his head 'twixt my knees on the
ground,
And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine,
As I poured down his throat our last measure of
wine,
Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
Was no more than his due who brought good news
from Ghent.

The contrast to this page may be found in the study of a painter unknown, whose colour is Florentine—"Pictor Ignotus." More Italian pages follow—"The Italian in England" and "The Englishman in Italy." We have not spoken yet of the Ferrara poem, "My Last Duchess." This is another experiment in the art of spiritual portraiture,—the life portrait of an egoist, and a masterly egoist of the Renaissance, selfish, self-absorbed, inhuman but something of a humanist.

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MY LAST DUCHESS

FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive ; I call
That piece a wonder, now : Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her ? I said
" Frà Pandolf " by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there ; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek : perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say " Her mantle laps
Over my Lady's wrist too much," or " Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat ; " such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart . . . how shall I say ? . . . too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed ; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 't was all one ! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good ; but
thanked

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Somehow . . . I know not how . . . as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping, and I chuse
Never to stoop. Oh, Sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave com-
mands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your Master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, Sir! Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

In certain poems of this volume Browning mixed his two methods, the ballad mode and the monologue; and in his "Count Gismond" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" he adapts himself in turn without difficulty to the moods and characters of a Provençal knight-at-arms or a Spanish monk. In his "Incident of the French Camp" he deals again with the

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single episode, related with the utmost suggestive rapidity and carried to a tragic end in five stanzas.

INCIDENT OF THE FRENCH CAMP

I

You know, we French stormed Ratisbon :
A mile or so away
On a little mound, Napoléon
Stood on our storming-day ;
With neck out-thrust, you fancy how,
Legs wide, arms locked behind,
As if to balance the prone brow
Oppressive with its mind.

II

Just as perhaps he mused " My plans
That soar, to earth may fall,
Let once my army-leader Lannes
Waver at yonder wall,"—
Out 'twixt the battery-smokes there flew
A rider, bound on bound
Full-galloping ; nor bridle drew
Until he reached the mound.

III

Then off there flung in smiling joy,
And held himself erect
By just his horse's mane, a boy :
You hardly could suspect—
(So tight he kept his lips compressed,
Scarce any blood came thro')
You looked twice ere you saw his breast
Was all but shot in two.

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IV

“ Well,” cried he, “ Emperor, by God’s grace
We’ve got you Ratisbon !
The Marshal’s in the market-place,
And you’ll be there anon
To see your flag-bird flap his vans
Where I, to heart’s desire,
Perched him ! ” The Chief’s eye flashed ; his
plans
Soared up again like fire.

V

The Chief’s eye flashed ; but presently
Softened itself, as sheathes
A film the mother eagle’s eye
When her bruised eaglet breathes :
“ You’re wounded ! ” “ Nay,” his soldier’s pride
Touched to the quick, he said :
“ I’m killed, Sire ! ” And, his Chief beside,
Smiling the boy fell dead.

It is not easy in these pages to come upon any glimpses that reveal the poet in his own life, save by those inferences which it is not always safe to draw. The poem called “ Waring ” in this series is really a draft from the life of his friend and fellow-poet, Alfred Domett. He had written in one of his many confidences to “ Waring ” about his work : “ You can do anything . . . and will do much. . . . *I will, if I live.* ” Here we have Browning and his friend scheming and working together in the London of the ’forties. And the very echo of

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its streets seems to linger in the opening passages of the poem :

What's become of Waring
Since he gave us all the slip,
Chose land-travel or seafaring,
Boots and chest, or staff and scrip,
Rather than pace up and down
Any longer London-town ?

Who'd have guessed it from his lip,
Or his brow's accustomed bearing,
On the night he thus took ship,
Or started landward ?—little caring
For us, it seems, who supped together,
(Friends of his too, I remember)
And walked home thro' the merry weather,
The snowiest in all December ;
I left his arm that night myself
For what's-his-name's, the new prose-poet,
That wrote the book there, on the shelf—
How, forsooth, was I to know it
If Waring meant to glide away
Like a ghost at break of day ?
Never looked he half so gay !

Afterwards, when Domett had gone abroad and was actually living on the land, Browning wrote to him offering to open the doors of certain offices : “ I know the editors now and I will do my best for you, but don't leave off ploughing, for poetry will come of that.”

In the same cycle “ The Flight of the Duchess ” is in some sort an improvisation, what one may call a ballad-at-large. Its fluent, garrulous

50

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verse flows on with a torrent of words, epithets, and double rhymes :

Whether they weld you, for instance, a snaffle
With side-bars never a brute can baffle ;
Or a lock that's a puzzle of wards within wards ;
Or, if your colt's fore-foot inclines to curve inwards,
Horseshoes they'll hammer which turn on a swivel
And won't allow the hoof to shrivel ;
Then they cast bells like the shell of the winkle,
That keep a stout heart in the ram with their tinkle :
But the sand—they pinch and pound it like otters ;
Commend me to Gypsy glass-makers and potters !
Glasses they'll blow you, crystal-clear,
Where just a faint cloud of rose shall appear,
As if in pure water you dropped and let die
A bruised black-blooded mulberry.

Meanwhile Browning was working the other dramatic-vein in his plays. But as he went on he came to recognize that the chances of writing drama which should be acted under the conditions that then obtained on the London stage must shut off the freer exercise of his own real dramatic faculty. In "A Soul's Tragedy" he produced finally a manifesto of his failure to face conditions so exacting. It is written in two parts, with no question of acts or scenes or stage directions, and the first part is devoted to "what was called the poetry of Chiappino's life" and the second part to its prose. The hero is painted in self-revelatory colours that suggest the moral motley of an incomplete character. He is a grumbler and a self-deceiver, not quite a man and not quite a patriot. While

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we are speculating about him and what his full nature is meant to be, the dramatic crisis occurs : his friend, Luitolfo, appears abruptly on the scene in a moment of need because he has struck and apparently killed the Provost. Then it seems Chiappino is to prove a hero indeed, for he is ready to take his friend's garb and his guilt upon him and to die in his place. But instead of the soldiers to arrest a murderer, it is the people that rush in to hail him as the deliverer of his country, and they call upon him now to lead them. This puts his substitute Chiappino into a pretty dilemma, and the issue can only be properly enjoyed by reading the play itself. In the second part Browning drops back upon prose in place of blank verse, and there the interlocations of Ogniben are full of humour and picturesque dialectic and living observation. But the set of actors who could put "A Soul's Tragedy" on the stage and make it as tragic and as comic as Browning intended, is yet to be discovered. Indeed it is clear that he never really meant it to be acted save on the imaginary stage that was on the other side of his writing-table.

V

WE have spoken already of the effect produced by "Paracelsus" upon one reader, Elizabeth Barrett. The acquaintance to which that led had soon ripened into friendship and then into love. His friend

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Kenyon had suggested to Browning that he should write to her a letter which was dated January 10, 1845. The letter began, all short, with a tribute which would have gone to the heart of any poet, to wit, "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett." Owing to an accident when she was a young girl, by which she was thrown from a pony, Miss Barrett was an invalid and more or less a prisoner to her own room. What may be called internal events, and those which bore upon her own ideals in art and poetry, counted to her more than such things do in ordinary lives. Her new friend brought into her sick chamber robust airs of the outer world, but still a world played upon by that light of imagination which to her was all in all. Gradually the two friends became indispensable to one another, and when one autumn it became a question of the invalid's being sent to winter abroad, their relationship was carried definitely to a climax in their engagement, although it had to be an engagement kept secret from her father. Mr. Barrett was rather in the way of fulfilling the part of the old-style pattern-father who took his children's affairs and destinies into his own hands and ruled their lives without much consideration of their own feelings. He had already prevented one daughter from accepting the man of her choice, and it soon became plain that his opposition to Elizabeth's connexion with the lover whose chief means of livelihood was poetry was likely to be stern and uncompromising. As it

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was, he prevented his daughter from going abroad, although her health was markedly endangered by her staying in England. However, what the father proposed, the fates had decided otherwise. One morning in September 1846—the year when the last or eighth part of “Bells and Pomegranates,” containing “Luria” and “A Soul’s Tragedy,” was published—the daughter left her father’s door in Wimpole Street, attended by a single maid, and found her way to the nearest cab-stand. The cab took them to the Church of St. Marylebone, where the two poets were married, to part again at the church door. They did not see each other for some days after that important event, but meanwhile their plans had been arranged for their final flight abroad—very trying days for both of them. On the following Saturday afternoon, while according to the Victorian custom the rest of the household were at dinner, the newly married bride and her maid again crept out of the house and drove to the railway-station for Southampton. Next morning they had reached Paris. The communion between the two was so absolute, the experiences which they shared together in Italy and the ideas arising out of their life together there were poetically so significant, that we naturally look to find a new spirit entering into the pages of both writers. In the story of “Luria” we found Pisa, as it were, confronting Florence, and it was at Pisa that they made their abode for the first winter. They had quarters near

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the Duomo, and the famous Leaning Tower was visible from their windows. Here Mrs. Browning wrote "Sonnets from the Portuguese," in which she reaches the highest mark of her achievement. One day (as Mr. Gosse has related), when Robert Browning stood looking out of the window at the spectacle in the street, waiting for the breakfast-table to be cleared that he might settle to work, his wife stood up behind him and put a little packet of papers into his coat-pocket. These papers contained the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," and as they had been written unknown to him, his wonder and delight may be conceived. They impressed him indeed as "the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare," and that is a verdict assuredly with which no critic will be in any hurry to quarrel. They did not at first bear the title by which we now know them. Their writer, wishing to throw a disguise over the passionate love they expressed, at first thought of calling them "Sonnets from the Bosnian," as if to suggest that they were paraphrases from another tongue. But Browning sometimes called his wife his "little Portuguese," and he it was who advised their being given that label, saying, "They are Caterina's sonnets." The following spring they left Pisa for Florence; and there they found quarters to their mind at last in the Guidi Palace—in a fine suite of rooms which commanded the Church of San Felici. These surroundings account for the title of Mrs.

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Browning's next work, "Casa Guidi Windows." There too "Aurora Leigh" was begun, and in March 1849 a son was born. These were anxious days for Browning, with the health of a sensitive and delicate wife going through so great a strain; and at home the death of his mother, to whom he was fondly devoted, the news of which came to him almost on the morrow of his son's birth, proved a greater care than his own health could bear. They travelled about, accordingly, in the next few weeks through Italy and drank fresh health and great draughts of Italian life and spring-time, and Browning, seeing his wife's delight in these new experiences, began himself to revive. His mind recovered its force and resilience, and presently he gathered up his new energies for the writing of his remarkable poem of spiritual vision and powerful realistic imagination, "Christmas Eve and Easter Day."

We are made aware as we turn the pages of this poem of 1849-50 that a change has passed over the writer's mind, and that he has thought out vividly and passionately some of those questions of destiny and judgment which can touch an imaginative spirit to great issues. Of the two sections of the book, "Christmas Eve" is a description of an almost uncouth religious experience. The picture of the little chapel is touched in with grotesque colours that have been likened to those in some of the prose pictures of Dickens. In them indeed Browning seems to have anticipated and given

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the cue to some of our latest realistic versemen who have attempted to deal vitally with the sensations and the religious overtaking of the reprobate and the outcast. Take the opening cartoon :

Out of the little chapel I burst
Into the fresh night air again.
I had waited a good five minutes first
In the doorway, to escape the rain
That drove in gusts down the common's centre,
At the edge of which the chapel stands,
Before I plucked up heart to enter :
Heaven knows how many sorts of hands
Reached past me, groping for the latch
Of the inner door that hung on catch,
More obstinate the more they fumbled,
Till, giving way at last with a scold
Of the crazy hinge, in squeezed or tumbled
One sheep more to the rest in fold,
And left me irresolute, standing sentry
In the sheepfold's lath-and-plaster entry,
Four feet long by two feet wide,
Partitioned off from the vast inside—
I blocked up half of it at least.

The study of the sky in one of the succeeding pages is painted with no less power. In this passage Browning uses, as he has often before, and as he was often to do again, his skyscape to enlarge and to heighten the sense of the human experiences that are passing more or less unconsciously below.

The companion pictures of the agnostic Professor's lecture-room in Göttingen and of the

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“Easter Day” amid the pomp and splendour of the Basilica at Rome bring to the pages of this work a memorable quality which marks them out in the Browning record. And again, in the “Easter Day” poem, the mysterious spectacle of the sky and of the dome of heaven towering up above the city adds a last touch of symbolic meaning to the argument :

And as I said

This nonsense, throwing back my head
With light complacent laugh, I found
Suddenly all the midnight round
One fire. The dome of Heaven had stood
As made up of a multitude
Of handbreadth cloudlets, one vast rack
Of ripples infinite and black,
From sky to sky. Sudden there went,
Like horror and astonishment,
A fierce vindictive scribble of red
Quick flame across, as if one said
(The angry scribe of Judgment) “There—
Burn it !” And straight I was aware
That the whole ribwork round, minute
Cloud touching cloud beyond compute,
Was tinted each with its own spot
Of burning at the core, till clot
Jammed against clot, and spilt its fire
Over all heaven, which ’gan suspire
As fanned to measure equable,—
As when great conflagrations kill
Night overhead, and rise and sink,
Reflected. Now the fire would shrink
And wither off the blasted face
Of heaven, and I distinct could trace

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The sharp black ridgy outlines left
Unburned like network—then, each cleft
The fire had been sucked back into,
Regorged, and out it surging flew
Furiously, and night writhed inflamed,
Till, tolerating to be tamed
No longer, certain rays world-wide
Shot downwardly, on every side,
Caught past escape ; the earth was lit ;
As if a dragon's nostril split
And all his famished ire o'erflowed ;
Then, as he winced at his Lord's goad,
Back he inhaled : whereat I found
The clouds into vast pillars bound,
Based on the corners of the earth,
Propping the skies at top : a dearth
Of fire i' the violet intervals,
Leaving exposed the utmost walls
Of time, about to tumble in
And end the world.

The passage of the sixteenth canto that follows
is needed to complete the effect :

I felt begin

The Judgment-Day : to retrocede
Was too late now.—“ In very deed,”
(I uttered to myself) “ that Day ! ”
The intuition burned away
All darkness from my spirit too—
There, stood I, found and fixed, I knew,
Choosing the world. The choice was made—
And naked and disguiseless stayed,
And unevadeable, the fact.
My brain held ne'ertheless compact

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Its senses, nor my heart declined
Its office—rather, both combined
To help me in this juncture—I
Lost not a second,—agony
Gave boldness : there, my life had end
And my choice with it—best defend,
Applaud them ! I resolved to say,
“ So was I framed by Thee, this way
I put to use Thy senses here !
It was so beautiful, so near,
Thy world,—what could I do but choose
My part there ? Nor did I refuse
To look above the transient boon
In time—but it was hard so soon
As in a short life, to give up
Such beauty : I had put the cup
Undrained of half its fullness, by ;
But, to renounce it utterly,
—That was too hard ! ” . . .

What is remarkable in the poem is that Browning does not use in it one direct didactic note. He leaves the message which it contains to be drawn from the imaginative suggestion and the figurative life which are inherent in the subject as he conceives it. In spite of the fact, moreover, that it also is ostensibly a dramatic deliverance, yet the conviction with which it is written is not to be mistaken. As one critic has said of it : “ While the poet does not necessarily identify himself with the seer of the vision, his poem contains some of his deepest thoughts on life and religion.”

This criticism leads us to one of Browning's rare prose-pieces, his introductory essay to

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certain newly discovered letters of Shelley, which were afterwards found to be forged. It affords a testament incidentally of his own poetic creed, in which he distinguishes between the "fashioner" and the "seer":

The objective poet is one whose endeavour has been to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain) with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction. It has been obtained through the poet's double faculty of seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply than is possible to the average mind, at the same time that he is so acquainted and in sympathy with its narrower comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole. . . . Such a poet is properly the ποιήτης, the fashioner; and the thing fashioned, his poetry, will of necessity be substantive, projected from himself and distinct. . . .

The subjective poet, gifted like the objective poet with the fuller perception of nature and man, is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth—an ultimate view aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand—it is toward these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity

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he has to do ; and he digs where he stands—preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak. Such a poet does not deal habitually with the picturesque groupings and tempestuous tossings of the forest trees, but with their roots and fibres naked to the chalk and stone. . . .

It seems not so much from any essential distinction in the faculty of the two poets or in the nature of the objects contemplated by either, as in the more immediate adaptability of these objects to the distinct purpose of each that the objective poet in his appeal to the aggregate human mind chooses to deal with the doings of men (the result of which dealing in its pure form is what we call dramatic poetry) ; while the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the working of his brain. . . .

Perhaps we may now decide that as he went on, Browning, realizing the difference in spirit between the types he analysed in this essay, felt in himself that the time had come to unite their two functions in one. Hence that artistic union of the lyric and dramatic elements which enabled him to effect his new interpretation, and lent special force to his next book with its various freight.

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VI

IF one were obliged by the exigencies of time, or of an earthquake, to take to flight with the smallest possible amount of literary baggage, the single work of Browning's that it would be hardest to leave behind would be "Men and Women." That is the judgment by consent of his sympathetic critics—one which will be found to hold good when all his works, late or early, are ranged in their whole extent side by side.

The Brownings paid a visit to London in 1855, the year when "Men and Women" appeared, and, casting back to that period with our present feeling about the value of his work and his unshaken fame, we find it difficult to believe that he was still comparatively an unknown poet, and that in fact writers whose names we are willingly forgetting had then three and four times his popularity. Nothing proves so clearly the conviction and the belief in his message with which Browning followed his ideal than the simple fact that he wrote much of his finest work when he was receiving no encouragement from the public, and when the critics looked upon his verse as crude, or unintelligible, which was even worse.

However, if there was a fine fortitude in this, it was one that he shared with other poets of the true line; and Shelley sang with far less appreciation in his day than Browning. We

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are indirectly reminded of it by the poem
"Memorabilia" in this very book :

MEMORABILIA

I

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you ?
And did you speak to him again ?
How strange it seems, and new !

II

But you were living before that,
And you are living after,
And the memory I started at—
My starting moves your laughter !

III

I crossed a moor with a name of its own
And a use in the world no doubt,
Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
'Mid the blank miles round about—

IV

For there I picked up on the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather—
Well, I forget the rest.

There it is an eagle-feather that becomes the talisman of remembrance. In "Evelyn Hope" it is a "piece of geranium-flower" that is figured dying in the glass beside the death-

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bed, and a leaf is shut into the maiden's cold hand.

EVELYN HOPE

I

Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead !
Sit and watch by her side an hour.
That is her book-shelf, this her bed ;
She plucked that piece of geranium-flower,
Beginning to die too, in the glass.
Little has yet been changed, I think—
The shutters are shut, no light may pass
Save two long rays thro' the hinge's chink.

II

Sixteen years old when she died !
Perhaps she had scarcely heard my name—
It was not her time to love : beside,
Her life had many a hope and aim,
Duties enough and little cares,
And now was quiet, now astir—
Till God's hand beckoned unawares,
And the sweet white brow is all of her.

III

Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope ?
What, your soul was pure and true,
The good stars met in your horoscope,
Made you of spirit, fire and dew—
And just because I was thrice as old,
And our paths in the world diverged so wide,
Each was nought to each, must I be told ?
We were fellow mortals, nought beside ?

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IV

No, indeed ! for God above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love,—
I claim you still, for my own love's sake !
Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few—
Much is to learn and much to forget
Ere the time be come for taking you.

V

But the time will come,—at last it will,
When, Evelyn Hope, what meant, I shall say,
In the lower earth, in the years long still,
That body and soul so pure and gay ?
Why your hair was amber, I shall divine,
And your mouth of your own geranium's red—
And what you would do with me, in fine,
In the new life come in the old one's stead.

VI

I have lived, I shall say, so much since then,
Given up myself so many times,
Gained me the gains of various men,
Ransacked the ages, spoiled the climes ;
Yet one thing, one, in my soul's full scope,
Either I missed or itself missed me—
And I want and find you, Evelyn Hope !
What is the issue ? let us see !

VII

I loved you, Evelyn, all the while ;
My heart seemed full as it could hold—

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There was place and to spare for the frank young
smile

And the red young mouth and the hair's young
gold.

So, hush,—I will give you this leaf to keep—

See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand.

There, that is our secret ! go to sleep ;

You will wake, and remember, and understand.

Side by side with this elegy, suggested by the death of a young girl, we place "Love among the Ruins," a noble poem over a dead city. It is one that only Browning would have written, who felt as intensely about old houses, old castles, old cities, as he did about the human folk, living and dead, of his experience. The two poems gain by being studied in sequence—the open and rather plaintive melody of "Evelyn Hope" offers an interesting rhythmical contrast to the alternated stride, long and short, of "Love among the Ruins."

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

I

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles
Miles and miles

On the solitary pastures where our sheep
Half-asleep

Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop
As they crop—

II

Was the site once of a city great and gay,
(So they say)

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Of our country's very capital, its prince
Ages since
Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far
Peace or war.

III

Now—the country does not even boast a tree,
As you see,
To distinguish slopes of verdure, certain rills
From the hills
Intersect and give a name to, (else they run
Into one)

IV

Where the domed and daring palace shot its spires
Up like fires
O'er the hundred-gated circuit of a wall
Bounding all,
Made of marble, men might march on nor be prest,
Twelve abreast.

V

And such plenty and perfection, see, of grass
Never was !
Such a carpet as, this summer-time, o'erspreads
And embeds
Every vestige of the city, guessed alone,
Stock or stone—

VI

Where a multitude of men breathed joy and woe
Long ago ;
Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame
Struck them tame ;
And that glory and that shame alike, the gold
Bought and sold.

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VII

Now,—the single little turret that remains
 On the plains,
By the caper overrooted, by the gourd
 Overscored,
While the patching houseleek's head of blossom winks
 Through the chinks—

VIII

Marks the basement whence a tower in ancient time
 Sprang sublime,
And a burning ring all round, the chariots traced
 As they raced,
And the monarch and his minions and his dames
 Viewed the games.

IX

And I know, while thus the quiet-coloured eve
 Smiles to leave
To their folding, all our many-tinkling fleece
 In such peace,
And the slopes and rills in undistinguished grey
 Melt away—

X

That a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair
 Waits me there
In the turret, whence the charioteers caught soul
 For the goal,
When the king looked, where she looks now, breath-
 less, dumb
 Till I come.

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XI

But he looked upon the city, every side,
Far and wide,
All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades'
Colonnades,
All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts,—and then,
All the men !

XII

When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,
Either hand
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace
Of my face,
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech
Each on each.

XIII

In one year they sent a million fighters forth
South and north,
And they built their gods a brazen pillar high
As the sky,
Yet reserved a thousand chariots in full force—
Gold, of course.

XIV

Oh, heart ! oh, blood that freezes, blood that burns !
Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin !
Shut them in,
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest.
Love is best !

There is the vision of a dead city ; the
garrulous desire of the pleasure of a live one,
70

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as pictured and envied by an Italian person of quality, is humorously wrought into the page of another poem (which lends itself uncommonly well to being read aloud) :

UP AT A VILLA—DOWN IN THE CITY

(AS DISTINGUISHED BY AN ITALIAN PERSON OF QUALITY)

I

Had I but plenty of money, money enough and to spare,
The house for me, no doubt, were a house in the city-square.
Ah, such a life, such a life, as one leads at the window there !

II

Something to see, by Bacchus, something to hear, at least !
There, the whole day long, one's life is a perfect feast ;
While up at a villa one lives, I maintain it, no more than a beast.

III

Well now, look at our villa ! stuck like the horn of a bull
Just on a mountain's edge as bare as the creature's skull,
Save a mere shag of a bush with hardly a leaf to pull !
—I scratch my own, sometimes, to see if the hair's turned wool.

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IV

But the city, oh the city—the square with the houses
Why ?
They are stone-faced, white as a curd, there's something to take the eye !
Houses in four straight lines, not a single front awry !
You watch who crosses and gossips, who saunters,
who hurries by :
Green blinds, as a matter of course, to draw when
the sun gets high ;
And the shops with fanciful signs which are painted
properly.

V

What of a villa ? Though winter be over in March
by rights,
'Tis May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered
well off the heights :
You've the brown ploughed land before, where the
oxen steam and wheeze,
And the hills over-smoked behind by the faint grey
olive trees.

VI

Is it better in May, I ask you ? you've summer all
at once ;
In a day he leaps complete with a few strong April
suns !
'Mid the sharp short emerald wheat, scarce risen
three fingers well,
The wild tulip, at end of its tube, blows out its great
red bell,
Like a thin clear bubble of blood, for the children to
pick and sell.

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VII

Is it ever hot in the square ? There's a fountain to
spout and splash !
In the shade it sings and springs ; in the shine such
foam-bows flash
On the horses with curling fish-tails, that prance and
paddle and pash
Round the lady atop in the conch—fifty gazers do not
abash,
Though all that she wears is some weeds round her
waist in a sort of sash !

VIII

All the year long at the villa, nothing's to see though
you linger,
Except yon cypress that points like Death's lean
lifted forefinger.
Some think fireflies pretty, when they mix in the
corn and mingle,
Or thrid the stinking hemp till the stalks of it seem
a-tingle.
Late August or early September, the stunning cicada
is shrill,
And the bees keep their tiresome whine round the
resinous firs on the hill.
Enough of the seasons,—I spare you the months of
the fever and chill.

IX

Ere opening your eyes in the city, the blessed church-
bells begin :
No sooner the bells leave off, than the diligence
rattles in :

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You get the pick of the news, and it costs you never
a pin.

By and by there's the travelling doctor gives pills,
lets blood, draws teeth ;

Or the Pulcinello-trumpet breaks up the market
beneath.

At the post-office such a scene-picture—the new play,
piping hot !

And a notice how, only this morning, three liberal
thieves were shot.

Above it, behold the archbishop's most fatherly of
rebukes,

And beneath, with his crown and his lion, some little
new law of the Duke's !

Or a sonnet with flowery marge, to the Reverend
Don So-and-so

Who is Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarca, Saint Jerome, and
Cicero,

“ And moreover,” (the sonnet goes rhyming,) “ the
skirts of St. Paul has reached,

Having preached us those six Lent-lectures more
unctuous than ever he preached.”

Noon strikes,—here sweeps the procession ! our Lady
borne smiling and smart

With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven
swords stuck in her heart !

Bang, whang, whang, goes the drum, tootle-te-tootle
the fife ;

No keeping one's haunches still : it's the greatest
pleasure in life.

X

But bless you, it's dear—it's dear ! fowls, wine, at
double the rate.

They have clapped a new tax upon salt, and what oil
pays passing the gate

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It's a horror to think of. And so, the villa for me,
not the city !

Beggars can scarcely be choosers—but still—ah, the
pity, the pity !

Look, two and two go the priests, then the monks
with cowls and sandals,

And the penitents dressed in white shirts, a-holding
the yellow candles.

One, he carries a flag up straight, and another a cross
with handles,

And the Duke's guard brings up the rear, for the
better prevention of scandals.

Bang, whang, whang, goes the drum, *tootle-te-tootle*
the fife.

Oh, a day in the city-square, there is no such pleasure
in life !

The faculty Browning had of what we may call painting a character, suggesting a look, an expression, a face, a mood, by tracing the effect on the narrator or the onlooker, is proved to our admiration by these creatures of his intimate world. In certain poems, and especially "Andrea del Sarto," where the painter's art is directly involved, the actual lineaments themselves are traced. Notice the portrait of King Francis at Fontainebleau, and the attendant group of courtiers :

ANDREA DEL SARTO

(CALLED "THE FAULTLESS PAINTER")

But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia ; bear with me for once :
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.

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You turn your face, but does it bring your heart ?
I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,
Treat his own subject after his own way,
Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
And shut the money into this small hand
When next it takes mine. Will it ? tenderly ?
Oh, I'll content him,—but to-morrow, Love !
I often am much wearier than you think,
This evening more than usual, and it seems
As if—forgive now—should you let me sit
Here by the window with your hand in mine
And look a half hour forth on Fiesole,
Both of one mind, as married people use,
Quietly, quietly, the evening through,
I might get up to-morrow to my work
Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try.
To-morrow how you shall be glad for this !
Your soft hand is a woman of itself,
And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.
Don't count the time lost, either ; you must serve
For each of the five pictures we require—
It saves a model. So ! keep looking so—
My serpentining beauty, rounds on rounds !
—How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
Even to put the pearl there ! oh, so sweet—
My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,
Which everybody looks on and calls his,
And, I suppose, is looked on by in turn,
While she looks—no one's : very dear, no less !
You smile ? why, there's my picture ready made.
There's what we painters call our harmony !
A common greyness silvers everything,—
All in a twilight, you and I alike
—You, at the point of your first pride in me
(That's gone you know),—but I, at every point ;

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.
There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top ;
That length of convent-wall across the way
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside ;
The last monk leaves the garden ; days decrease
And autumn grows, autumn in everything.
Eh ? the whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight-piece. Love, we are in God's hand.
How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead !
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are :
I feel he laid the fetter : let it lie !
This chamber for example—turn your head—
All that's behind us ! you don't understand
Nor care to understand about my art,
But you can hear at least when people speak ;
And that cartoon, the second from the door
—It is the thing, Love ! so such things should be—
Behold Madonna, I am bold to say.
I can do with my pencil what I know,
What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep—
Do easily, too—when I say perfectly
I do not boast, perhaps : yourself are judge
Who listened to the Legate's talk last week,
And just as much they used to say in France.
At any rate 'tis easy, all of it,
No sketches first, no studies, that's long past—
I do what many dream of all their lives
—Dream ? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive—you don't know how the others strive

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,
Yet do much less, so much less, some one says,
(I know his name, no matter) so much less !
Well, less is more, Lucrezia ! I am judged.
There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed, beating, stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
Enter and take their place there sure enough,
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.
The sudden blood of these men ! at a word—
Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too.
I, painting from myself and to myself,
Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame
Or their praise either. Somebody remarks
Morello's outline there is wrongly traced,
His hue mistaken—what of that ? or else,
Rightly traced and well ordered—what of that ?
Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a Heaven for ? all is silver-grey
Placid and perfect with my art—the worse !
I know both what I want and what might gain—
And yet how profitless to know, to sigh
“ Had I been two, another and myself,
Our head would have o'erlooked the world ! ” No
doubt.

Yonder's a work, now, of that famous youth
The Urbinate who died five years ago.
('Tis copied, George Vasari sent it me.)
Well, I can fancy how he did it all,
Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Reaching, that Heaven might so replenish him,
Above and through his art—for it gives way ;
That arm is wrongly put—and there again—
A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,
Its body, so to speak ! its soul is right,
He means right—that, a child may understand.
Still, what an arm ! and I could alter it.
But all the play, the insight and the stretch—
Out of me ! out of me ! And wherefore out ?
Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you.
Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think—
More than I merit, yes, by many times.
But had you—oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare—
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind !
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
“ God and the glory ! never care for gain.
The present by the future, what is that ?
Live for fame, side by side with Angelo—
Rafael is waiting. Up to God all three ! ”
I might have done it for you. So it seems—
Perhaps not. All is as God over-rules.
Beside, incentives come from the soul's self ;
The rest avail not. Why do I need you ?
What wife had Rafael, or has Angelo ?
In this world, who can do a thing, will not—
And who would do it, cannot, I perceive :
Yet the will's somewhat—somewhat, too, the power—
And thus we half-men struggle. At the end,
God, I conclude, compensates, punishes.
'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,
That I am something underrated here,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.
I dared not, do you know, leave home all day,
For fear of chancing on the Paris lords.
The best is when they pass and look aside ;
But they speak sometimes ; I must bear it all.
Well may they speak ! That Francis, that first time,
And that long festal year at Fontainebleau !
I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,
Put on the glory, Rafael's daily wear,
In that humane great monarch's golden look,—
One finger in his beard or twisted curl
Over his mouth's good mark that made the smile,
One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,
The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,
[I] painting proudly with his breath on me,
All his court round him, seeing with his eyes,
Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of souls
Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts,—
And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,
This in the back-ground, waiting on my work,
To crown the issue with a last reward !
A good time, was it not, my kingly days ?
And had you not grown restless—but I know—
'Tis done and past ; 'twas right, my instinct said ;
Too live the life grew, golden and not grey—
And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt
Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.
How could it end in any other way ?
You called me, and I came home to your heart.
The triumph was to have ended there—then if
I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost ?
Let my hands frame your face in your hair's gold,
You beautiful Lucrezia that are mine !
“ Rafael did this, Andrea painted that—
The Roman's is the better when you pray,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

But still the other's Virgin was his wife—"
Men will excuse me. I am glad to judge
Both pictures in your presence ; clearer grows
My better fortune, I resolve to think.
For, do you know, Lucrezia, as God lives,
Said one day Angelo, his very self,
To Rafael . . . I have known it all these years . . .
(When the young man was flaming out his thoughts
Upon a palace-wall for Rome to see,
Too lifted up in heart because of it)
" Friend, there's a certain sorry little scrub
Goes up and down our Florence, none cares how,
Who, were he set to plan and execute
As you are pricked on by your popes and kings,
Would bring the sweat into that brow of yours ! "
To Rafael's !—And indeed the arm is wrong.
I hardly dare—yet, only you to see,
Give the chalk here—quick, thus the line should go !
Ay, but the soul ! he's Rafael ! rub it out !
Still, all I care for, if he spoke the truth,
(What he ? why, who but Michael Angelo ?
Do you forget already words like those ?)
If really there was such a chance, so lost,
Is, whether you're—not grateful—but more pleased.
Well, let me think so. And you smile indeed !
This hour has been an hour ! Another smile ?
If you would sit thus by me every night
I should work better, do you comprehend ?
I mean that I should earn more, give you more.
See, it is settled dusk now ; there's a star ;
Morello's gone, the watch-lights show the wall,
The cue-owls speak the name we call them by.
Come from the window, Love,—come in, at last,
Inside the melancholy little house
We built to be so gay with. God is just.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

King Francis may forgive me. Oft at nights
When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
The walls become illumined, brick from brick
Distinct, instead of mortar fierce bright gold,
That gold of his I did cement them with !
Let us but love each other. Must you go ?
That Cousin here again ? he waits outside ?
Must see you—you, and not with me ? Those loans !
More gaming debts to pay ? you smiled for that ?
Well, let smiles buy me ! have you more to spend ?
While hand and eye and something of a heart
Are left me, work's my ware, and what's it worth ?
I'll pay my fancy. Only let me sit
The grey remainder of the evening out,
Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly
How I could paint were I but back in France,
One picture, just one more—the Virgin's face,
Not yours this time ! I want you at my side
To hear them—that is, Michael Angelo—
Judge all I do and tell you of its worth.
Will you ? To-morrow, satisfy your friend.
I take the subjects for his corridor,
Finish the portrait out of hand—there, there,
And throw him in another thing or two
If he demurs ; the whole should prove enough
To pay for this same Cousin's freak. Beside,
What's better and what's all I care about,
Get you the thirteen scudi for the ruff.
Love, does that please you ? Ah, but what does he,
The Cousin ! what does he to please you more ?

I am grown peaceful as old age to-night.
I regret little, I would change still less.
Since there my past life lies, why alter it ?
The very wrong to Francis ! it is true

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

I took his coin, was tempted and complied,
And built this house and sinned, and all is said.
My father and my mother died of want.
Well, had I riches of my own ? you see
How one gets rich ! Let each one bear his lot.
They were born poor, lived poor, and poor they died :
And I have laboured somewhat in my time
And not been paid profusely. Some good son
Paint my two hundred pictures—let him try !
No doubt, there's something strikes a balance. Yes,
You loved me quite enough, it seems to-night.
This must suffice me here. What would one have ?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance—
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem
Meted on each side by the angel's reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Angelo and me
To cover—the three first without a wife,
While I have mine ! So—still they overcome
Because there's still Lucrezia,—as I choose.

Again the Cousin's whistle ! Go, my Love.

Again, in the grim ballad entitled simply
“Before,” observe the sketch, drawn in two
strokes and two epithets, of the evil genius of
the black offender :

What's the leopard-dog-thing, constant to his side,
A leer and lie in every eye in its obsequious hide ? . . .

Note also the companion-piece, “After,” with
its death-mask of the slain man :

Take the cloak from his face, and at first
Let the corpse do its worst.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

How he lies in his rights of a man !

Death has done all death can.

And absorbed in the new life he leads,

He recks not, he heeds

Nor his wrong nor my vengeance—both strike

On his senses alike,

And are lost in the solemn and strange

Surprise of the change. . . .

I would we were boys as of old

In the field, by the fold—

His outrage, God's patience, man's scorn

Were so easily borne.

Among other studies in the series which we might call *Painters' Poems*, "Fra Lippo Lippi" must be mentioned. This, too, was one of the dramatic monologues in which Browning drew upon the pages of Vasari. Like "Andrea del Sarto," the portrait is rendered with a certain mixture of literal facts and ideal humour. A comparison of Vasari's prose with the verse of the poem shows how faithfully Browning kept to his model. But when he came to the presentment of the figure and the indicating of his surroundings and the suggestion of the true functions of art, he knew how to transmute his material with as fine a touch as Shakespeare himself when he was making a transcript from Plutarch. The gaiety and the naturalness of the monologue are so contrived as to suggest without effort the merry vagabond spirit of the painter. Delightful use is made in it of bits of interspersed lyric to lighten the narrative colours, as in the passage

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where Fra Lippo Lippi, tired of painting "saints and saints and saints again," says :

I could not paint all night—
Ouf ! I leaned out of window for fresh air.
There came a hurry of feet and little feet,
A sweep of lute-strings, laughs, and whiffs of song,—
Flower o' the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb !
Flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good's in life since ?
Flower o' the thyme—and so on. Round they went.
Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter,
Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight,—three
 slim shapes—
And a face that looked up . . . zooks, sir, flesh and
 blood,
That's all I'm made of !

It is almost a pity not to give the poem entire, but we must be content here to give one more passage. It is where the painter has been speaking of the young art-student Guidi and then pauses to dilate on the real function of art :

However, you're my man, you've seen the world
—The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises,—and God made it all !
—For what ? do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
These are the frame to ? What's it all about ?
To be passed o'er, despised ? or dwelt upon,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Wondered at ? oh, this last of course, you say.
But why not do as well as say,—paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it ?
God's works—paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip. Don't object, " His works
Are here already—nature is complete :
Suppose you reproduce her—(which you can't)
There's no advantage ! you must beat her, then."
For, don't you mark, we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see ;
And so they are better, painted—better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that—
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out.

Browning's interest in music as a companion art to his own which signally helped to illustrate and enlarge the message he had to bring was, as we know, as keen as that he felt for the painter's calling. In his " Toccata of Galuppi's " he has some verses by whose metrical cunning he succeeds in expressing something of the very cadence of the music they describe. We give the opening stanzas and then the seventh, in which he shows again how close his technical understanding of music was, and there we must leave Galuppi :

I

Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find !
I can hardly misconceive you ; it would prove me
deaf and blind ;
But although I give you credit, 'tis with such a heavy
mind !

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II

Here you come with your old music, and here's all
the good it brings.

What, they lived once thus at Venice, where the
merchants were the kings,

Where St. Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed
the sea with rings ?

III

Ay, because the sea's the street there ; and 'tis
arched by . . . what you call

. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they
kept the carnival !

I was never out of England—it's as if I saw it all !

.

VII

What ? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths
diminished, sigh on sigh,

Told them something ? Those suspensions, those
solutions—" Must we die ? "

Those commiserating sevenths—" Life might last !
we can but try ! "

In the above poem Browning's imaginative phantasy enables him through the music—" the shadowy toccata "—to summon up an airy picture of the life of Venice, a city of pleasure existing by day and night only to enjoy its own sensations. Another musical study, " Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," seems to be an entirely fanciful portrait ; that is to say, the composer whom it describes is not to be found in any

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musical cyclopædia. The monologue itself is that of an organist, another figure entirely of Browning's invention, who discusses a fugue in F minor. The verse fairly revels in double rhymes and grotesque idioms in trying to suggest the effect of the fugue and the singing of the five voices, in making them suggest the moral of life itself.

So your fugue broadens and thickens,
Greatens and deepens and lengthens,
Till one exclaims—" But where's music, the
dickens ?

Blot ye the gold, while your spider-web
strengthens,
Blackened to the stoutest of tickens ? "

I for man's effort am zealous.

Prove me such censure's unfounded !
Seems it surprising a lover grows jealous—
Hopes 'twas for something his organ-pipes
sounded,
Tiring three boys at the bellows ?

Is it your moral of Life ?

Such a web, simple and subtle,
Weave we on earth herein impotent strife,
Backward and forward each throwing his
shuttle,
Death ending all with a knife ?

Music reappears in " Abt Vogler," and that poem we shall come to among the " Dramatis Personæ." But there is a set of verses in " Saul,"

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telling of David singing to Saul in his agony, that show the sweetness Browning could give to his verse whenever he pleased. There is first this fine description of David's approach to Saul, who stood silent and grim within his tent :

At the first I saw nought but the blackness ; but
soon I descried
A something more black than the blackness—the
vast, the upright
Main prop which sustains the pavilion : and slow
into sight
Grew a figure against it, gigantic and blackest of
all ;—
Then a sunbeam, that burst thro' the tent-roof—
showed Saul.

Then David took the lilies off the harp-strings
and played :

Then I tuned my harp,—took off the lilies we twine
round its chords
Lest they snap 'neath the stress of the noontide—
those sunbeams like swords !
And I first played the tune all our sheep know, as,
one after one,
So docile they come to the pen-door, till folding be
done.
They are white and untorn by the bushes, for lo, they
have fed
Where the long grasses stifle the water within the
stream's bed ;
And now one after one seeks its lodging, as, star
follows star

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Into eve and the blue far above us,—so blue and so far !

—Then the tune, for which quails on the cornland
will each leave his mate

To fly after the player ; then, what makes the crickets
elate,

Till for boldness they fight one another : and then,
what has weight

To set the quick jerboa a-musing outside his sand
house—

There are none such as he for a wonder, half bird
and half mouse !—

God made all the creatures and gave them our love
and our fear,

To give sign, we and they are his children, one family
here.

Then I played the help-tune of our reapers, their
wine-song, when hand

Grasps at hand, eye lights eye in good friendship, and
great hearts expand

And grow one in the sense of this world's life.—And
then, the last song

When the dead man is praised on his journey—
“ Bear, bear him along

With his few faults shut up like dead flowerets ! are
balm-seeds not here

To console us ? The land has none left, such as he
on the bier.

Oh, would we might keep thee, my brother ! ”—And
then, the glad chaunt

Of the marriage,—first go the young maidens, next,
she whom we vaunt

As the beauty, the pride of our dwelling.—And then,
the great march

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Wherein man runs to man to assist him and buttress
an arch

Nought can break ; who shall harm them, our friends ?

—Then, the chorus intoned

As the Levites go up to the altar in glory enthroned . . .

But I stopped here—for here in the darkness, Saul
groaned.

Of the other art-poems in “ Men and Women,” “ Old Pictures in Florence ” and “ The Guardian Angel ” deserve a place in the Browning anthology. The first can hardly be judged by quotation, but we must find room for two stanzas in which Browning speaks of Nicolo and Cimabue and others :

But at any rate I have loved the season

Of Art's spring-birth so dim and dewy,

My sculptor is Nicolo the Pisan ;

My painter—who but Cimabue ?

Nor ever was man of them all indeed,

From these to Ghiberti and Ghirlandajo,

Could say that he missed my critic-meed.

So now to my special grievance—heigh ho !

Their ghosts now stand, as I said before,

Watching each fresco flaked and rasped,

Blocked up, knocked out, or whitewashed o'er

—No getting again what the church has grasped.

The works on the wall must take their chance,

“ Works never conceded to England's thick
clime ! ”

(I hope they prefer their inheritance

Of a bucketful of Italian quick-lime.)

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The second poem, "The Guardian Angel," must be given complete. Its sub-title is "A Picture at Fano," and you will observe as you read it how truly the poet felt for the painter, in translating his angelic art into song.

I

Dear and great Angel, wouldst thou only leave
That child, when thou hast done with him, for me !
Let me sit all the day here, that when eve
Shall find performed thy special ministry
And time come for departure, thou, suspending
Thy flight, mayst see another child for tending,
Another still, to quiet and retrieve.

II

Then I shall feel thee step one step, no more,
From where thou standest now, to where I gaze,
And suddenly my head be covered o'er
With those wings, white above the child who prays
Now on that tomb—and I shall feel thee guarding
Me, out of all the world ; for me, discarding
Yon heaven thy home, that waits and opes its door !

III

I would not look up thither past thy head
Because the door opes, like that child, I know,
For I should have thy gracious face instead,
Thou bird of God ! And wilt thou bend me low
Like him, and lay, like his, my hands together,
And lift them up to pray, and gently tether
Me, as thy lamb there, with thy garment's spread ?

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IV

If this was ever granted, I would rest
My head beneath thine, while thy healing hands
Close-covered both my eyes beside thy breast,
Pressing the brain, which too much thought expands,
Back to its proper size again, and smoothing
Distortion down till every nerve had soothing,
And all lay quiet, happy and supprest.

V

How soon all worldly wrong would be repaired !
I think how I should view the earth and skies
And sea, when once again my brow was bared
After thy healing, with such different eyes.
O world, as God has made it ! all is beauty :
And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.
What further may be sought for or declared ?

VI

Guercino drew this angel I saw teach
(Alfred, dear friend)—that little child to pray,
Holding the little hands up, each to each
Pressed gently,—with his own head turned away
Over the earth where so much lay before him
Of work to do, though heaven was opening o'er him,
And he was left at Fano by the beach.

VII

We were at Fano, and three times we went
To sit and see him in his chapel there,
And drink his beauty to our soul's content
—My angel with me too : and since I care

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For dear Guercino's fame, (to which in power
And glory comes this picture for a dower,
Fraught with a pathos so magnificent)

VIII

And since he did not work so earnestly
At all times, and has else endured some wrong,—
I took one thought his picture struck from me,
And spread it out, translating it to song.
My love is here. Where are you, dear old friend ?
How rolls the Wairoa at your world's far end ?
This is Ancona, yonder is the sea.

In "Men and Women" Browning perfected and finally justified his method. He peopled his region with a set of characters who live, indeed, by right, with a whole multitude of ideally created folk born at that time—including a new group of Dickens characters, Thackeray's Colonel Newcome, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, Charles Kingsley's Amyas Leigh, and George Meredith's Shagpat. It was, in fact, one of those times when the imaginary population of English literature had a signal enlargement, and Robert Browning was an active agent in the increase. Fra Lippo Lippi, Giotto, Galuppi, the Lady of the Firelight in "By the Fireside," Karshish the Arab, the serenader of the Villa, the Tyrant of "Instans Tyrannus," the mysterious Rider of "Childe Ronald to the Dark Tower came," the Valladolid poet, Master Hugues, Bishop Blougram, Constance and Norbert, Protus, Cleon, the Heretic of the "Heretic's Tragedy," and

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the dead "Grammarian of the "Funeral": what a populace, more lifelike, more interesting to us now than the lives of kings and queens, this one book of Browning's has added to the other Italy and the other England of the imagined world. The "Envoi" addressed to "E. B. B." as "One Word More" tells his own feeling at having achieved what was to prove his highest attainment in poetry:

There they are, my fifty men and women
Naming me the fifty poems finished!
Take them, Love, the book and me together.
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also.

"Dramatis Personæ" came after "Men and Women"—twenty poems in all, continuing the same line of studies in the life and ruling passion of the characters sub-dramatized. They open with the sea-cycle of "James Lee's Wife," a love-story told in nine episodes, each attached to a change of mood: I, The Window; II, the Fireside; III, the Doorway; IV, the Beach; V, the Cliff; VI, the Book and the Wind; VII, the Rocks; VIII, the Drawing-board; and IX, the Ship's-deck. The wind in the sixth song becomes a symbol of the change, and the trouble in love, that have come over the story:

Still ailing, Wind? Wilt be appeased or no?
Which needs the other's office, thou or I?
Dost want to be disburthened of a woe,
And can, in truth, my voice untie
Its links, and let it go?

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Small thing as this "James Lee" cycle may appear amid the mass of its author's work, it yet has had remarkable effect as seed sown in other people's minds. Many of its phrases and verses have become proverbial; one, "Love for a Key," has given the title to a romance. The opening stanza of No. III has in lyric colour hardly been excelled in the Victorian anthology :

The swallow has set her six young on the rail,
And looks sea-ward :
The water's in stripes like a snake, olive pale
To the leeward,—
On the weather-side, black, spotted white with the
wind.
"Good fortune departs, and disaster's behind"—
Hark, the wind with its wants and its infinite wail !

In "Dramatis Personæ," too, occur several other poems which added to the lyric dialect of their time; for instance, the pendant to "James Lee's Wife," which continues the same method, "D's Aliter Visum."

A few pages further and we come on yet another of the musical monologues in "Abt Vogler," who is heard confessing himself and his art "after he has been extemporizing upon the musical instrument of his invention." In his spirit we are led through the music of time to the eternal; through the creative musician to the Creator of all Music, the song culminates in the stanzas from which we quoted on our opening page :

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All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good
shall exist ;

Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor good,
nor power

Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for
the melodist

When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth
too hard,

The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the
sky,

Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;

Enough that He heard it once ; we shall hear it by
and by.

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fullness of the days ? Have we withered
or agonized ?

Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing
might issue thence ?

Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should
be prized ?

Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,

Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal
and woe :

But God has a few of us whom He whispers in the
ear ;

The rest may reason and welcome : 'tis we musicians
know.

“ A Death in the Desert ” and “ Prospice ”
are different expressions of the approach to the
dread hour by two men who did not fear it.
The first is the supposed end of St. John, as
narrated in a parchment of Pamphylax ; and

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it is made the vehicle of his faith in Christ's Blessed Mystery. The other is a wonderful song of heroic contempt for death :

PROSPICE

Fear death ?—to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe ;
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
Yet the strong man must go :
For the journey is done and the summit attained,
And the barriers fall,
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
The reward of it all.
I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last !
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,
And bade me creep past.
No ! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest !

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In several of the poems of this volume written half-way in Browning's career, we have glimpses of his own life and history, disguised in the lives and aspects of other men. So it would certainly appear to be in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," which is the poet's creed lyricized and never so lightly wrapped in a foreign roll. Read it in one mood and it seems little, and not sure of its effect ; read it in another, and it will impress you with its weighted lines, as it did afterwards a disciple like Swinburne, who converted some of them to his own use with a marvellous command of rhythm. Three stanzas will serve for its warranty in the critical anthology, which can only point out where the riches lie :

I

Grow old along with me !
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made :
Our times are in His hand
Who saith " A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half ; trust God : see all nor
be afraid ! "

II

Not that, amassing flowers,
Youth sighed " Which rose make ours,
Which lily leave and then as best recall ? "
Not that, admiring stars,
It yearned " Nor Jove, nor Mars ;
Mine be some figured flame which blends, transcends
them all ! "

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III

Not for such hopes and fears
Annulling youth's brief years,
Do I remonstrate : folly wide the mark !
Rather I prize the doubt
Low kinds exist without,
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.

We have to realize that in the term of years that passed between the books "Men and Women" and "Dramatis Personæ" the poet had lost his dear companion in life and art. Elizabeth Barrett Browning died in June 1861, and he left Italy for London in that year with half the motive for life and work seemingly gone. The burden of the thoughts the dire change brought to him may be gathered in many a page of the later book, such as we have cited : thoughts of love and death, and the courage in face of death. The real strength of his nature was to be seen in the writing of the next work.

VII

WITH the writing of "The Ring and the Book" Browning entered upon that later period which was marked by a critical change in his art of poetry. That is, conscious of an instrument whose use in rendering the spiritual predicament of men and women he had verified and justified, at point after point, he began to take a more intellectual interest in certain darker

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phases of human nature, and the problems of life and mind they offered to him. No doubt his art as poetry suffered at times. For with the poet there is always a danger that as the ebullient lyrical temper in him grows less, with the advance of years he will replace the essentially poetical and imaginative by a more philosophical and excogitative treatment of the themes that occur to him.

We have had Browning as a tireless dealer in men and women ; but now we have to watch how the method he had used in his preceding work was to be given yet larger dimensions. He had written dramatic lyrics before ; now he turned to shape a dramatic epic on lines original and characteristically his own.

The title tells the source whence the story came—an old square yellow quarto, partly in type, partly written, which he bought for a lira (eightpence) on a second-hand bookstall in the Piazza at Florence. The book itself has now been translated into English and published for every man to read, and just as one takes up Holinshed to account for some of Shakespeare's history plays, so one turns the pages of this veritable document from the life to understand the process by which he converted it into a series of masterly monodramas. The treatment of the story as it takes shape in Browning's hands is of a kind that he alone, with his power of sustained imagination, could have safely ventured upon. He has divided it into twelve

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cartoons, each one representing a different draft of the same theme, but so drawn as to be both a revelation of a single character and an illumination of the central tragedy. This, to put it crudely, as plainly as Browning put it himself, is nothing more or less than a Roman murder case. The murderer-in-chief is Guido Franceschini, who engaged four cut-throats to aid him in carrying out his revenge on a wife whom he took to be guilty. It is clear that in the hands of any ordinary artist the whole thing might have been turned into a lurid melodrama with no imaginative relief. But Browning, by his use of the witnesses and main actors in the drama, has contrived to give a spiritual cast to the most sordid elements of the theme. He has done it, too, without neglecting any detail, realistic, grotesque, or personal, which can call up the picture of Rome in the late seventeenth century.

In the first book he, as chorus to the tragedy, unfolds the whole story, opening with the Ring and suggesting its symbolic effect, and using no reserve as to any mystery to come :

Do you see this Ring ?

'Tis Rome-work, made to match
(By Castellani's imitative craft)

Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,

After a dropping April ; found alive

Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-side figtree-roots

That roof old tombs at Chiusi : soft, you see,

Yet crisp as jewel-cutting. There's one trick,

(Craftsmen instruct me) one approved device

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And but one, fits such slivers of pure gold
As this was,—such mere oozings from the mine,
Virgin as oval tawny pendent tear
At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow,—
To bear the file's tooth and the hammer's tap :
Since hammer needs must widen out the round,
And file emboss it fine with lily-flowers,
Ere the stuff grow a ring-thing right to wear.
That trick is, the artificer melts up wax
With honey, so to speak ; he mingles gold
With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,
Effects a manageable mass, then works.
But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
Oh, there's repriming ! Just a spurt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume ;
While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
The rondure brave, the lily-loveliness,
Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore :
Prime nature with an added artistry—
No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.
What of it ? 'Tis a figure, a symbol, say ;
A thing's sign : now for the thing signified.

Then he passes to the Old Yellow Book :

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss
I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about
By the crumpled vellum covers,—pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries
since ?

Examine it yourselves ! I found this book,
Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just,
(Mark the predestination !) when a Hand,

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Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,
One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm,
Across a square in Florence, crammed with booths,
Buzzing and blaze, noontide and market-time ;

Here it is, this I toss and take again ;
Small-quarto size, part print part manuscript :
A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries
since.

Give it me back ! The thing's restorative
I' the touch and sight.

The succeeding pages give us the main events carried through to their catastrophe, and described in that verse, vividly colloquial yet at times concentrated to a degree, which was indeed the natural instrument of his fantasy. The passage in which he describes Count Guido and his wife Pompilia and the incidents of the murder in some twenty or thirty rapid, unornamented lines will serve to show how terse his writing in this kind had become :

Count Guido Franceschini the Aretine,
Descended of an ancient house, though poor,
A beak-nosed bushy-bearded black-haired lord,
Lean, pallid, low of stature yet robust,
Fifty years old,—having four years ago
Married Pompilia Comparini, young,
Good, beautiful, at Rome, where she was born,
And brought her to Arezzo, where they lived
Unhappy lives, whatever curse the cause,—
This husband, taking four accomplices,

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Followed this wife to Rome, where she was fled
From their Arezzo to find peace again,
In convoy, eight months earlier, of a priest,
Aretine also, of still nobler birth,
Giuseppe Caponsacchi,—and caught her there
Quiet in a villa on a Christmas night,
With only Pietro and Violante by,
Both her putative parents ; killed the three,
Aged, they, seventy each, and she, seventeen,
And, two weeks since, the mother of his babe
First-born and heir to what the style was worth
O' the Guido who determined, dared and did
This deed just as he purposed point by point.

But it was not enough in his estimate to tell
a story of doom, figure the actors, paint the
scene, and leave the reader to supply the rest ;
for Browning the telling anew of this piece of
history meant reincarnating each personage in
himself and psychologizing the good and evil
passions that had had a share in building it up.

Let this old woe step on the stage again,

he says, not by mere sense and sight, but
according to that intimate dramatic law which
he had framed for the governing of his psycho-
drama. Lest we should lose sight of the poet
himself in this strange pageant of his Roman
characters, we are given for our relief at the end
of the first book a delightful lyrical invocation,
in which he calls up again the memory of his
wife, and reminds us of the fact that this was
the first grand task to which he had set himself
after her death.

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O lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—
Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—
Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—
When the first summons from the darkling earth
Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,
And bared them of the glory—to drop down,
To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—
This is the same voice : can thy soul know change ?
Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help !
Never may I commence my song, my due
To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
That still, despite the distance and the dark,
What was, again may be ; some interchange
Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
Some benediction anciently thy smile :
—Never conclude, but raising hand and head
Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn
For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,
Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back
In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,
Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,
Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall !

The following books each in turn offer a new version of the story as realized from a different point of view and by a new speaker. The locutors take now one side, now another in judging the case on its merits. The first to appear personifies "Half-Rome," and we gather that the witness is himself a husband who has doubts of his own wife and of the other

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sex at large. It is a wonderful motley vista of human nature and of Roman life upon which he opens the door, and he ends by suggesting that the murder and its legal consequences may be a very good thing for husbands and wives, especially in Rome.

What, you, Sir, come too ? (Just the man I'd meet.)
Be ruled by me and have a care o' the crowd :
This way, while fresh folk go and get their gaze :
I'll tell you like a book and save your shins.
Fie, what a roaring day we've had ! Whose fault ?
Lorenzo in Lucina,—here's a church
To hold a crowd at need, accommodate
All comers from the Corso ! If this crush
Make not its priests ashamed of what they show
For temple-room, don't prick them to draw purse
And down with bricks and mortar, eke us out
The beggarly transept with its bit of apse
Into a decent space for Christian ease,
Why, to-day's lucky pearl is cast to swine.
Listen and estimate the luck they've had !

The next book, the third, conjures up "The Other Half-Rome" figured in the person of a rather romantically inclined young man, a bachelor without doubt, who speaks of the still lingering victim, Guido's wife, little Pompilia of the patient brow, a lamentable smile on her lips and a flower-like body in the hospital. The first speaker's character was seen in his Italian garrulity. The second was earnest and himself profoundly moved by what he had to tell.

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There she lies in the long white lazar-house.
Rome has besieged, these two days, never doubt,
Saint Anna's where she waits her death, to hear
Though but the chink o' the bell, turn o' the hinge
When the reluctant wicket opes at last,
Lets in, on now this and now that pretence,
Too many by half,—complain the men of art,—
For a patient in such plight. The lawyers first
Paid the due visit—justice must be done ;
They took her witness, why the murder was ;
Then the priests followed properly,—a soul
To shrive ; 'twas Brother Celestine's own right,
The same who noises thus her gifts abroad :
But many more, who found they were old friends,
Pushed in to have their stare and take their talk
And go forth boasting of it and to boast.

The fourth book is entitled " *Tertium Quid*," and may be described as the Superior Person's view of the affair. He is too fine a gentleman to commit himself unwarrantably to any decisive judgment, and now by a touch of cynicism, and now by a note of indifference, he leaves people of his own standing and caste to form their own opinions of Guido and Pompilia and the other figures concerned. The fourth book left the pendulum oscillating, but with the fifth we are aware of a sudden and violent break in the rhythm. For now Count Guido Franceschini himself is brought upon the scene, chief actor in the play, and the scene itself shifts to the interior of the court-house. The man, the murderer, is revealed in the evidence he gives, and the mean, deceiving, and vainly disguising

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words in which he endeavours to put a favourable complexion upon his part in the murder, which he cannot deny : the whole composes an autobiographic portrait of singular reality. Perhaps it is here and there a little too evident that the dramatist allowed himself the luxury of hating his villain, but undoubtedly he makes us feel as the Count betrays his nature out of his own mouth that here indeed was an evil thing, subtle and cruel in its evil doing.

I' the name of the indivisible Trinity !
Will my lords, in the plenitude of their light,
Weigh well that all this trouble has come on me
Through my persistent treading in the paths
Where I was trained to go,—wearing that yoke
My shoulder was predestined to receive,
Born to the hereditary stoop and crease ?
Noble, I recognised my nobler still,
The church, my suzerain ; no mock-mistress, she ;
The secular owned the spiritual : mates of mine
Have thrown their careless hoofs up at her call
“ Forsake the clover and come drag my wain ! ”
There they go cropping : I protruded nose
To halter, bent my back of docile beast,
And now am whealed, one wide wound all of me,
For being found at the eleventh hour o' the day
Padding the mill-track, not neck-deep in grass :
—My one fault, I am stiffened by my work,
—My one reward, I help the Court to smile !

I am representative of a great line,
One of the first of the old families
In Arezzo, ancientest of Tuscan towns.

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When my worst foe is fain to challenge this,
His worst exception runs—not first in rank
But second, noble in the next degree
Only ; not malice 'self maligns me more.

With the sixth book we pass to the evidence of Giuseppe Caponsacchi, the priest who helped Pompilia to fly from her husband to Rome. In the opening lines he is self-portrayed for us as by the suppressed or open emotion of his words and a characteristic gesture of his hand after a fashion to engage at once the onlookers' sympathies. There is a sincerity too in his speech that marks it off from the patent sophistry and the vicious rhetoric of the Count. Twelve lines from the close of his evidence show us the nature of the man and of the priest in the man shaken to the very roots of his being. If the blank verse rings very clear in the evidence of the priest, it takes on a note naive, and at times almost child-like, in the succeeding book, the seventh, which is the story of Pompilia told in her own words.

Listen what this is like !

When I was a mere child, my mother . . . that's
Violante, you must let me call her so
Nor waste time, trying to unlearn the word, . . .
She brought a neighbour's child of my own age
To play with me of rainy afternoons ;
And, since there hung a tapestry on the wall,
We two agreed to find each other out
Among the figures. " Tisbe, that is you,
With half-moon on your hair-knot, spear in hand,

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Flying, but no wings, only the great scarf
Blown to a bluish rainbow at your back :
Call off your hound and leave the stag alone ! ”
“ —And there are you, Pompilia, such green leaves
Flourishing out of your five finger-ends,
And all the rest of you so brown and rough :
Why is it you are turned a sort of tree ? ”
You know the figures never were ourselves
Though we nicknamed them so. Thus, all my life,—
As well what was, as what, like this, was not,—
Looks old, fantastic and impossible :
I touch a fairy thing that fades and fades.
—Even to my babe ! I thought, when he was born,
Something began for once that would not end,
Nor change into a laugh at me, but stay
For evermore, eternally quite mine.
Well, so he is,—but yet they bore him off,
The third day, lest my husband should lay traps
And catch him, and by means of him catch me.
Since they have saved him so, it was well done :
Yet thence comes such confusion of what was
With what will be,—that late seems long ago,
And, what years should bring round, already come,
Till even he withdraws into a dream
As the rest do : I fancy him grown great,
Strong, stern, a tall young man who tutors me,
Frowns with the others “ Poor imprudent child !
Why did you venture out of the safe street ?
Why go so far from help to that lone house ?
Why open at the whisper and the knock ? ”

With the eighth book we move from the chief actors in the tragedy to the lawyers who are assisting at the trial—Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, Pauperam Procurator. He is in

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effect the official defender of criminals, just as the Fisc is the official prosecutor who appears in Book Nine, to wit—Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius, Fiesci et Rev. Cam. Apostol. Advocatus. It would have been easy to prove, on the lines adopted by some critics of Shakespeare, that Browning must have been an Italian lawyer at some period of his history in order to write the eighth and ninth books as he did, so crowded are they with legal terms and bits of Latin gag. Indeed, there are pages which make the effect of being more of a glossary than anything else, and are likely to try the patience of any ordinary reader. The complaisant comment of Dr. Johannes at the close of his long oration confesses the pleasant vanity of the man.

Then, with Book Ten, we come to the Pope himself, who sums up with the wisdom of justice and long and ripe human experience the true issues of the case. By this, indeed, the case, so far as the Court is concerned, is over, the murderer has been proved guilty, and it rests with the Pope as final arbiter to decide whether Count Guido shall suffer the extreme penalty or not. The one care he has at the last is for the possible spark of living spirit left in this vile nature, but there can be no mercy left for him on earth as there can be small chance of his final salvation, and so the Pope puts his hand to the death-warrant.

I will, Sirs : for a voice other than yours
Quickens my spirit. " Quis pro Domino ?

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Who is upon the Lord's side ? " asked the Count.
I, who write—

“ On receipt of this command,
Acquaint Count Guido and his fellows four
They die to-morrow : could it be to-night,
The better, but the work to do, takes time.
Set with all diligence a scaffold up,
Not in the customary place, by Bridge
Saint Angelo, where die the common sort ;
But since the man is noble, and his peers
By predilection haunt the People's Square,
There let him be beheaded in the midst,
And his companions hanged on either side :
So shall the quality see, fear, and learn.
All which work takes time : till to-morrow, then,
Let there be prayer incessant for the five ! ”

For the main criminal I have no hope
Except in such a suddenness of fate.
I stood at Naples once, a night so dark
I could have scarce conjectured there was earth
Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all :
But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore,
Through her whole length of mountain visible :
There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.
So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.
Else I avert my face, nor follow him
Into that sad obscure sequestered state
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
He else made first in vain ; which must not be.
Enough, for I may die this very night
And how should I dare die, this man let live ?
Carry this forthwith to the Governor !

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To this succeeds the last utterance of the doomed man himself as he pours it into the ears of the Cardinal and the Abbot, two former friends of his, who come on the last night to hear his confession, and finally accompany him to the scaffold.

You are the Cardinal Acciaiuoli, and you
Abate Panciatichi—two good Tuscan names :
Acciaiuoli—ah, your ancestor it was,
Built the huge battlemented convent-block
Over the little forky flashing Greve
That takes the quick turn at the foot o' the hill
Just as one first sees Florence : oh those days !
'Tis Ema, though, the other rivulet,
The one-arched, brown brick bridge yawns over,—yes,
Gallop and go five minutes, and you gain
The Roman Gate from where the Ema's bridged :
Kingfishers fly there : how I see the bend
O'erturreted by Certosa which he built,
That Senescal (we styled him) of your House !
I do adjure you, help me, Sirs ! My blood
Comes from as far a source : ought it to end
This way, by leakage through their scaffold-planks
Into Rome's sink where her red refuse runs ?
Sirs, I beseech you by blood-sympathy,
If there be any vile experiment
In the air,—if this your visit simply prove,
When all's done, just a well-intentioned trick,
That tries for truth truer than truth itself,
By startling up a man, ere break of day,
To tell him he must die at sunset,—pshaw !
That man's a Franceschini ; feel his pulse,
Laugh at your folly, and let's all go sleep !
You have my last word,—innocent am I

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As Innocent my Pope and murderer,
Innocent as a babe, as Mary's own,
As Mary's self,—I said, say, and repeat,—
And why, then, should I die twelve hours hence ? I—
Whom, not twelve hours ago, the gaoler bade
Turn to my straw-truss, settle and sleep sound
That I might wake the sooner, promptlier pay
His dues of meat-and-drink-indulgence, cross
His palm with fee of the good-hand, beside,
As gallants use who go at large again !
For why ? All honest Rome approved my part ;
Whoever owned wife, sister, daughter,—nay,
Mistress,—had any shadow of any right
That looks like right, and, all the more resolved,
Held it with tooth and nail,—these manly men
Approved ! I being for Rome, Rome was for me !

In the concluding pages, entitled "The Book and the Ring," we have the description of the execution narrated in the form of various letters actually written or supposed to be written at the time, with a passage of the sermon preached upon Pompilia. And then again, at the end of all, Browning himself clearly shows us his hand.

So did this old woe fade from memory,
Till after in the fullness of the days
My needs must find an ember yet unquenched
And, breathing, blow the spark to flame. It lives
If precious be the soul of man to man.

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VIII

SPACE fails to treat at length all Browning's later poems; and they are not, unless we rate his intellectual individuality and its further revelation beyond his poetry, of equal importance with his earlier work. "Balaustion's Adventure" followed in August 1871—a "May-month amusement" he styled it in the dedication. It is a transcript from an episode in "Plutarch's Lives"—the life of Nicias, and very characteristically it presents her—

Balaustion ! the lyric girl.

Browning's interest in the poetical diagnosis of mixed characters is shown again in his "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society," which is an imaginary portrait of Louis Napoleon, last Emperor of the French. The idea is to explain his character, not to gild his broken crown, or belittle his part in the human economy. As a character study it is remarkable; as a dramatic monologue it is colloquially, if not poetically, alive. The mannerism of the verse and the staccato of the rhythm destroy its real force; although it has lines and figures that take the reader's attention with the old power, as when it speaks of the "solitary great man" who is worth the world. We may call, if we will, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau the new Polonius;

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certainly his morality is often expedient, and his reading of himself self-complacent.

"Fifine at the Fair" is a more engaging theme, and there is more music in the narrative mode. Browning had seen in Brittany the model, so to call her, for the character: a gypsy rope-dancer of flower-bright colours and bold charms to suit the sun and the autumn afternoon in the merry land of France. The agent of the poem is again a dramatized spokesman, in this case a "modified Don Juan," as Mrs. Sutherland Orr has happily described him. It is impossible to render its effect in piecemeal; but its attempt to find the equation between the sensual and the spiritual life is marked by Browning's robust play of humour and shrewd and subtle philosophy.

"Red-Cotton Night-cap Country, or Turf and Towers" suggests a fantasy in its title which hardly appears in its strange half-Balzacian, half-Carlylean narrative. Some of its descriptive passages have that subtle art of place in which Browning early attained a verse-painter's mastery. But the people are dreadful bourgeois creatures, "tame snakes," whose souls would seem to be less than those reptiles could embody, were it not that here they are winged, and lifted, barely lifted, into significance and made potential. Léonce Miranda is another study in the rotten morality of a virtual Crétin, and the sensation of his death is of a part with the whole cartoon. The book is more a novel in verse than a poem: Charles Reade would have used

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the method of "Griffith Gaunt" and made it effective in prose. As in that story, the human atmosphere is overcharged, and the total effect is not quite satisfying.

Balaustion reappears in "Aristophanes' Apology," which forms the sequel to her "Adventure." In it she relates an episode that succeeded to her marriage, falling upon the day that brought the news of the death of Euripides to Athens. That evening she and her husband were at their own house when Aristophanes, returning home with a band of roysterers from the feast that followed what we should call the "successful production" of his play "The Thesmaphorians," suddenly appeared. Some instinct, mixed of satire and sympathy, has drawn him to the door of these people whom he knows as admirers of Euripides. In the apology that follows, expressed in very marked Aristophanic idiom, the old debate between the two rival playwrights comes to life again in congenial Browningsque colours. The wealth of allusion, the extraordinary knowledge of the Greek drama, and the life that was behind it exhibited in the poem individualize it at every point; but the texture is nevertheless not quite Greek. Browning himself may be described, so far as the warfare between the two poets attaches him rather to one camp than to the other, as a Euripidean. He sees in that poet a truer interpreter of the grand problems of human nature than the ironical master of comedy who made him the victim of his wit.

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The poem has been described as the finest contribution to the criticism of Greek drama written in our time. This is perhaps to say too much, but it is undoubtedly a dramatic study in the natures and characters of two great dramatists which gives one "curiously to think." It almost appears as if Browning out of his feeling for these two Greek poets had arrived at a stage now, in his own expression, of the tragic and comic elements of life, which was to threaten at points the adjustment of his poetic instrument to his material.

In his next poem, "The Inn Album," which appeared in November 1875, he takes four people, not in themselves very interesting and not redeemed by anything in their circumstance, and works out in their story a somewhat dreary spiritual tragedy. The elements do not quite combine poetically, and we leave the pages with a sense of disappointment, although it has noble passages like that describing the "burst of landscape" through the window which shows you "England's best,"—and the floating air and light in a May morning above the well-wooded and watered country, where a "steel-bright" stream threads the mist.

"Pacchiarotto, and How he Worked in Dis-temper," published with other poems in 1876, is, in effect, an apology for Browning's own art, and suggests that some of the criticisms, fair and unfair, levelled at his art had rankled not a little in his mind. He turns his critics into chimney-sweepers,—“ We critics as sweeps out

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your chimbley ! ”—and he accuses them of bringing more dirt into the house than they carry out. Some of Browning’s “ all’s well with the world ” philosophy is found in this poem. There is a grand cosmic drama going on, and the earth is but the practice place, and we must wait patiently for the great change.

“ At the ‘ Mermaid ’ ” carries us back to his old discrimination of the two kinds of poets in his essay on Shelley ; but we do not feel sure as we read it that Browning himself would always, in the case of other poets, rigidly divide their works from their lives. He protests that people seek out the facts of his private life in order to explain the dark things in his poems ; yet it is in this very poem that Browning does lay open his heart for us :

Have you found your life distasteful ?
My life did, and does, smack sweet. . . .

The two next poems, “ House ” and “ Shop,” continue the same line of vigorous expostulation and leave us with a grotesque idea of the possible cause for his feeling. It is as if the Browning Society had collected at his door one summer’s morning to ask what he had for breakfast, and if bacon and dry toast were a good preparation for dramatic psychology ? The tenth stanza of “ House ” contains the famous allusion to Shakespeare and his sonnets. “ With this same key,” he asks, “ did Shakespeare unlock his heart ? If so, the less Shakespeare he ! ”

The couple of poems called “ Pisgah Sights ”

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in the same volume give us another view of Browning's method of understanding life. He says that the world must of necessity appear out of proportion to us because we are too close to things, but if we can only move ourselves away from the matters that concern us and look on them even a handbreadth off, then the symmetry appears, and there is light. But it takes all Browning's art of verse to reconcile us to the use of metre which falls to a tripping step, and to the over-indulgence of double and triple rhymes.

The same superabundance of rhyming rather spoils one's pleasure in the otherwise delightful poem "St. Martin's Summer." In the succeeding ballad, "Hervé Riel," Browning is once again complete master of his instrument. Idiom, metre, and rhyme all march with one accord to the given tune.

IX

THE "Agamemnon" of Æschylus was the piece of work that Browning set himself after "Pacchiarotto." In it he tried to be faithfully literal and accurately interpretative; but he did not attempt the impossible. "I have done," he said, "as I would be done by." For the rest, was not the task commanded of him by his "venerated friend, Thomas Carlyle," and made worthy in his eyes by the insertion of that "dear and noble name," and did not the standard of translation the poet adopted require almost an

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audience of Carlyles and Brownings, interested in the extreme art of verbal gymnastic and rhetoric, to understand the text in detail ?

In the following May he added " *La Saisiaz* " and " *The Two Poets of Croisic* " to his works. The first, which means " *The Sun*," commemorates A. E. S.—that is, Ann Egerton-Smith, who died while on a visit to Browning and his sister at the villa so called, near Geneva. It is one of the most personal of his writings, and the description of the morning, returned from an early plunge in a pool to find no sign of the waiting tall white figure who usually stood on a mound to greet him, is wrought in bright, sad colours. Finally the poem becomes an argument for the divine destiny of the soul, urged over the soul of Rousseau. " *The Two Poets of Croisic* " is in another vein altogether. The first poet is René Gentilhomme, who served the Prince of Condé and became Muses' lackey to Louis XIII ; the second, Paul Desfarges Briand (or Maillard), born at Croisic in 1699, who played off a hoax on Paris and Voltaire by using the literary disguise of a supposed Mlle. Malcrais de la Vigne—" *a nice Breton name.*" The story gains fantasy by Browning's telling ; but it was one that could have been told in brief, say in Pope's couplets, with more verisimilitude.

In 1879 a first series of " *Dramatic Idylls* " appeared to be a return to his earlier manner ; but if so, it was resumed with a signal difference. He still sought to project the individual soul or temperament by a forcing of some dramatic

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idea, but his mind had become so fully stored with allusion, and his verse so easily grew dilated, that he often rather misses the ballad-like dispatch in his descriptive exuberance. Here he turns to the common folk for his themes. One of his characters is Martin Relph, who might have been a hero and who lives on a coward; terribly, remorsefully conscious of the fact. Halbert and Hob—the two wild men, father and son, who lived in a wild part of the North Country—are two genre portraits, still more grimly veracious, with a Christmas motive to enhance the father's tragedy. "Ivan Ivanovitch" is a tragic idyll—a Russian wolf-tale, where a mother's love fails in face of death—"Humanity's new wrong, motherhood's first disgrace." The ballad movement of the narrative is superb. "Ned Bratts" is a new reading of the tale of "Old Tod" in Bunyan's "Life and Death of Mr. Badman." The poem is bold and vivid to a degree; but Browning is simply not in it as a trenchant narrator by the side of Bunyan. Witness the ushering in of Old Tod in the latter's page, where the prose rhythm works like a charm under Bunyan's spell.

A second series of "Dramatic Idylls," issued in 1880, has more studies in the grotesque, dramatic portraits of men in action and passion. "Clive" is the most attractive, because one is already curious about his character. But the one piece of real ballad that stands forth in the book is in the Arab story of "Mulékkeh," the

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mare, and of Hoseyn's "ride" in pursuit of Duhl, the horse-stealer, who has gone off with her. The most memorable thing in the book that goes to make up what we may call the Browning testament, is to be found in the lyric postscript; and the fourteen-line prelude to "Jocoseria," the book of 1883, takes up the same personal cue. The ballad of "Donald" in this book tells vividly the mean tale of what amounts to the cruel murder of a stag by a deer-stalker on a mountain ridge. The distinctive note of the book is implied in the title, and it is perhaps not unfair to say that in poetry it is very easy to overwork the vein. There is a mixed element of serious and semi-grotesque in the long story of Jochanan Hakkadosh that makes it become rather tiresome before the whole of its seven hundred lines odd in terza-rima have run their course. The story, which treats of a supposed Rabbinic legend, has some fine passages; but it must be read as a whole, or it will not be understood. In another poem of the series, "Ixion," we have the old myth in a new form, and so wrought as to convey, and in this case with absolute conviction, the poet's sense of the Promethean revolt against divine tyranny.

November of the next year, 1884, brought a volume in Persian disguise, "Ferishtah's Fancies." Ferishtah is a supposed Dervish historian of the seventeenth century, and it seems to have been one of Pilpay's fables that Browning had read as a boy that indirectly

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suggested the cycle of poems. The "Fancies" deal in "The Eagle" and "The Melon-Seller" with the Dervish's own life. The remaining poems form a series of his moral homilies directed to others. "Shah Abbas" deals with faith, "The Family" with prayer, "The Sun" with the Incarnation, "A Camel-Driver" with punishment, "Mihrab Shah" with the problem of pain, "A Pillar at Sebzevah" contrasts knowledge and love, and "Apple-Eating" asks of life its riddle. The poems are not really Persian, and it has been well said that the Eastern garments are used for a disguise and not a habit. The philosophy of these "Fancies" is characteristically Browning's, full of hope and unconquerable optimism. We discover again that it is in moments of lyric exuberance and not in his narrative or homiletic moods that Browning seems to find his most expressive note.

The rest of the chronicle may soon be run through. Browning had been living for some time in Warwick Crescent, Paddington. In 1887, when he was seventy-five years old, his son was married and he changed his London abode, moving to South Kensington. One of his letters written from the former address and dated July 16, 1886, which refers to Landor and to a suggested republication of his essay on Shelley, testifies, so far as handwriting can, how well under control were his faculties of brain, eye, and hand.

In "Parleyings with certain People," which appeared in 1887, Browning fell back upon his

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old method of metempsychosis, putting himself into the states of life and thought of other persons, who could act as conductors to his own view of life. The full title of the book, as he designed it, is so characteristic that it deserves to be quoted at length: "Parleyings with certain People of Importance in their Day." The "people" include Bernard de Mandeville, Daniel Bartoli, Christopher Smart, George Bubb Dodington, Francis Furini, Gerard de Lairese, and Charles Avison. A dialogue between Apollo and the Fates opens the list, and another between John Fust and his friends ends it. The name of M. Milsand, in whose memory it is inscribed, recalls a friend by whose criticism he had profited in his later years. Of the actual interlocutors, Bernard de Mandeville was the author of "The Fable of the Bees," a book which was ordered to be burnt by the common hangman. Browning had great respect for this book and calls its writer Sage Mandeville; Bartoli was a Roman Jesuit; Christopher Smart was the unfortunate poet whom even Browning misjudges by saying that "until he lost his reason he was a very indifferent versifier." Perhaps Browning, like many another, had read only Smart's "Song of David," which was, according to the legend, written in a madhouse. For there are undoubtedly flashes of imagination in his earlier work, although they are intermitted with Cambridge fumes. Bubb Dodington was a beau, and follower of Walpole, and is generally considered the type of an immoral age of English public life.

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X

BROWNING'S last book, "Asolando," appeared on the day of his death, December 12, 1889. It contained some remarkable personalia, "Fancies and Facts," and lyric memoranda, including a quartet of Bad Dreams. But perhaps "Flute Music" (with an accompaniment) and the "Prologue" and last two poems, one of which is the "Epilogue" not only to a book but a life of poetry, are the pages one remembers best. From the "Epilogue" comes indeed a strain of night and day, and fear giving way to courage, which is like a *réveillé* heard by a soldier's grave—the grave of

One who never turned his back but marched
breast forward—

Never doubted clouds would break.

There is the note of an old poet who remained young in heart and gave his last music a crescent strain. We who look back over his whole work see that he wrote at the end as at the beginning by the light of his imagination. He has left us in his poetry indeed an expression of human nature rich, subtle, and various to a degree, which even "in the bustle of man's work-time" may be recalled for its sense of a larger life and an immortal destiny.

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